

THE DOCTOR'S DAUGHTER



SUSAN M.
BAGANZ

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The Doctor's Daughter

Susan M. Baganz

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The Doctor's Daughter

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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

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Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2018

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-9807-3

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To Kaye S. for your love and support through every aspect of the journey that God has called me to. I'm grateful for our friendship.

Author's Note

Influenza has long been a feared and virulent disease through the ages. Appendicitis was something dealt with periodically even by 1812 where an English Doctor Parkinson started reporting cases of surgeries for this disease.

During the tempestuous years between 1800-1820 or the more specific “Regency” years of 1811 to 1820, it was common for the upper classes, especially the men, to drink various forms of alcohol as part of their daily life. A glass of port wine was often savored by the men after the evening meal. French brandy was considered superior and highly coveted even though England was at war with France. In these stories my characters do at times drink, and sometimes even to excess with serious consequences for their overindulgence. This is not in any way a recommendation on the part of the author or Pelican Book Group to advocate the drinking of alcohol or to abuse any substance. Laudanum is an opiate that was often prescribed medicinally (although many did become addicted to the drug). The use of these in the story are merely an attempt to use this period in history and its notorious excesses as a backdrop where appropriate.

*Lord, you know the desires of my heart,
please lead and guide me to my true home.*

Miss Silvia Burnett

help meet

עֵזֶר, ay'-zer;

aid:—help.

Strong's Exhaustive Concordance

And the Lord God said,

“It is not good that the man should be alone;

I will make him an help meet for him.”

Genesis 2:18 (KJV)

Brighton, England 1815

Silvia paced as she packed up the remainder of her father's practice. His death had been sudden, and while she possessed some knowledge of medicine, she was incapable of filling the big shoes he'd left. The brisk November air sent a chill through her. She'd sold off most of his belongings but kept some of the older books on natural medicine. Although her father scoffed at some of the remedies, she'd found that many did work as she'd labored alongside him all these years.

She was out of time in this cottage.

Out of money.

Out of resources.

She needed to leave. Not only was the house no longer hers, but Sir McElroy's harassment had increased. The sooner she escaped his notice, the better, for she feared he would be ruthless in seeking to claim what he thought was his. She would never wed one such as he. His puffed-up consequence led him to believe that his station as a minor baronet meant she was his for the asking.

Her father always told her to follow God and listen to her heart. Her heart warned her that the baronet was dangerous, so she'd poured out her troubles in a letter to her friend Katrina. Her friend offered her refuge and the position as a nursemaid in their household, should she want it.

The work was not beneath her, but she longed for a family of her own. The only man she could envision that with was Bruce, who years ago studied with her father. The late Dr. Burnett had held a deep respect for the younger man. The remembrance of the doctor who had swept her off her feet years ago, surprised her.

Bruce.

Dr. Bruce Miller lived close to Katrina. Would Silvia see him again? Would he remember her? Would the attraction which had blossomed between them still be there?

Recently, she'd gone beyond the pale and written to him, practically begging him to marry her based on a long-ago promise. Why hadn't he returned to court her when she'd come of age? She shook her head at her foolishness. How could he? He had patients to care for and doctors didn't have the freedom to go on holiday at a whim's discretion. Besides, her too-forward missive had probably put him off.

She shoved the last item into her crate and motioned for the servant to carry it out to the carriage. She was grateful that her friend

sent one for her, insisting that she travel in comfort instead of on the stage.

“Are you ready Miss Burnett?” Sir Michael Tidley stepped inside and surveyed the empty room. She hadn’t expected Katrina to send her husband to fetch her.

“Yes, I am. Thank you for your assistance. I hope I haven’t delayed us too long.”

“Apology unnecessary. We’ll likely spend a night in a posting house which means I might get some much-needed sleep.”

Silvia grinned. Katrina had nabbed a good man with a quick wit. Silvia suspected her lamentations over Sir McElroy had caused her friend to take this precaution lest Silvia be detained by nefarious means. My, wasn’t Katrina becoming dramatic? Silvia grabbed her cloak and hat and headed for the door taking one last glanced around. This had been home for her entire life. She sighed. Adventure awaited, and if her prayers were answered, maybe even love.

“Let us be off, Sir Tidley.”

He closed the door after she exited and rushed to open the carriage door for her.

“Miss Burnett!”

She groaned. Not him. Not now. She glanced at Sir Tidley.

“Is that the man?” he whispered.

Nodding she turned to face her erstwhile suitor. “Sir McElroy. I must hasten away.” She put a foot on the first step to the carriage and Sir Tidley moved around to block most of her view and assist her. His cheeky grin reassured her that he was up to the task of helping rid her of this man.

“You cannot leave.” The baronet posed with one fist on his hip and another holding a monocle to his eye, an affectation that frustrated her no end.

“I can, and I must.” She took another step up and Michael handed her into the carriage, closing the door behind her.

McElroy’s jaw dropped as did his monocle, falling into the dirt. He bent to search for it as Sir Tidley jumped up to take the reins of the horses.

“Good bye!” As she waved, the horses jerked the carriage forward against the weight of all the luggage it carried.

“No!” McElroy stepped forward landing on the eyeglass and was so distracted by having ruined his pet object that he never spared her another glance.

Silvia settled back against the squabs, closed her eyes, and thanked God for His provision in time of need. Now if she could only overcome her anxiety as the unknown future loomed before her. For now, she had a place to be where she could be useful, but it wasn’t a

long-term solution. She sure hoped Bruce hadn't developed a tendre for any of the local women. She'd been afraid to ask Katrina about that.

~*~

Dr. Bruce Miller sighed as he slumped into his favorite chair in his humble abode. Silence surrounded him. Despair assailed him. His friends from university had all married, and he'd been there to assist with the birth of several children when the midwife was unavailable.

Here he sat.

Alone.

He reached for the stack of letters and began to thumb through them. One with a feminine script caught his attention. Women did not write to men to whom they were not related, wed, or affianced. Curiosity compelled him to open it. He slit the seal and unfolded the pages.

Dear Dr. Miller,

I am not sure if you remember me, but we were childhood friends a lifetime ago. I've heard wonderful reports of your practice in Didcot. Perhaps you recall your last visit here to Brighton? We talked and took walks. You were not established in your practice as of yet...

Bruce let the letter drop to his lap. He closed his eyes, and the sound of waves crashing on the rocks and the gulls screaming in the air as he inhaled the salt water aroma that reminded him of Brighton were as fresh as if he were there now. Fanciful thoughts for a bachelor. The woman beside him in his dream was one he'd not thought of for some time. A sweet blonde, the daughter of the local doctor with whom he'd spent time shadowing. The estimable Dr. Burnett had taught Bruce much.

The doctor's daughter was a sage young woman, only two years Bruce's junior. He was surprised to see Silvia Burnett's name at the bottom of the letter. He'd thought she'd be wed by now to one of the local gentry. How could it be that she was still unmarried? He began reading where he'd left off.

It is terribly forward of me to write to you now, but we once spoke fanciful words that if neither of us had found love, we would wed each other should I remain unwed at age of five and twenty. Quite long-in-the-tooth though I am, I remember you with great fondness. I am planning a trip to your area in the near future to visit a friend, Mrs. Katrina Tidley.

I hope perhaps that we would further our acquaintance whilst I'm there.

With fondness,

Silvia was coming here? She was a friend of Katrina's? How had he not been aware of that?

His malaise lifted. A Christmas gift, to be sure, as an often lonely season now held hints of promises to be kept and fulfilled. He kissed the letter and rose from his chair to go to bed. They were too young all those years ago, and she'd been right; he'd only begun to establish his practice when they'd left each other last. But now...perhaps God had brought an answer to his loneliness, heightened by the familial bliss so many of his friends experienced.

~*~

Bruce worked nonstop as an outbreak of influenza overtook the village. There was too much illness for one man. He was carefully washing his hands with every visit, before and aft, in an attempt keep himself healthy. Despite the harried frenzy of patients and babies due, there were just as many times where he longed for a quiet night in front of the fireplace with a cup of tea and a book.

Not that he had anyone with whom to share that moment.

Would Silvia be the one? Such foolishness to make promises like that to each other when they were both so young and starry-eyed. The world hadn't taught them hard lessons yet. But he'd seen too much pain, heartache, and death to not be pessimistic about his chances at finding love and happiness. Life was fragile and precious.

He wearily guided his horse down the lane and back to his home. Exhaustion overwhelmed him, and he was practically asleep in the saddle. Good thing his horse knew the way.

The sound of horses' hooves and the wheels of a carriage caught him off guard as he turned a corner in the lane.

"What ho!" shouted the driver as he pulled the carriage to a stop. "Well met, Dr. Miller."

"Sir Tidley? I'm sorry, I should have been watching the path more closely."

"You appear burnt to a socket, my good man," the knight proclaimed.

"An apt diagnosis. I'm for home and bed. Sickness has spread, and I've been busy."

"I am sorry to hear that. Anything serious?"

"Influenza has struck early and it's a virulent strain."

"You've not been to my home, have you?"

"No, Sir Tidley. Your family are all well, and I've not seen them for some time. Thank you for not running me over." He pulled his horse off to the side of the road, so the carriage could pass.

"Good day, Bruce. Rest and stay well." He snapped the reins and

the horses pulled forward again.

As the carriage passed, the visage of a young woman appeared in the window. Her gaze held Bruce's, and she smiled.

Silvia? His heart welled with hope as he turned his horse to home. He needed to rest. Tomorrow he hoped to visit the Tidley home to meet their guest. Tonight, perhaps he'd have happier dreams.

~*~

Silvia could hardly believe her eyes as she'd watched the interchange between Dr. Miller and Sir Tidley. Poor Bruce appeared tired, but he was still attractive. A sudden shyness kept her from leaving the coach to speak to him herself. She could hardly wait for him to visit. She hoped the invitation in her eyes was enough for him to get the message. She smiled to herself, her hopes buoyed.

After arriving at Hart Manor, a groom let down the steps and assisted her from the carriage while Michael gave orders for her luggage. She stepped into the courtyard as Katrina rushed out of the house. She greeted her husband with a warm embrace that caused Silvia to turn away from their display of affection in order to afford the couple some modicum of privacy.

"Silvia!" Katrina called her name and approached. "I am so glad you've come. I apologize if I made you uncomfortable, but I am extraordinarily fond of my husband and missed him terribly."

"You needn't have sent him. A servant would have sufficed."

"Ah, but your arrogant suitor might have bested a mere servant. My husband, however, is wily and clever. It seems he managed to spirit you out of Brighton without incident."

"Well, the incident was minor, only because Sir McElroy dropped his monocle during a pose and stepped on it." She giggled. "His vanity allowed us time to escape without being importuned."

"You are here now and safe from puffed up aristocrats. Even Lord Remington, my cousin, is as wonderful as you could wish, and he's a viscount. His brother Jared was knighted last year as well. You have friends a plenty here to keep you safe and occupied."

"Katrina, dear," Sir Tidley interrupted them. "We spied Dr. Miller on his way home. He said there's been an outbreak of influenza in the area. Is everyone well?"

"We're all fine here. Poor Bruce. He's probably overly-exhausted. We should invite him soon to tea. Silvia's father was a doctor, so they might find some common ground. Come. You've had a long journey and I'll take you to your rooms, so you can refresh yourself. I've held back dinner in anticipation of your later arrival." Katrina kept up her chatter as they ascended the stairs to the suite Silvia would call her own.

"I thought I was to be serving as your nanny. I should be in the

servant's quarters."

"That was a ruse to get you here. I don't really need a nanny but will gladly accept help. My offer of wages stands. You are also an honored guest and I'm so sad that you were left in the lurch, as you were. Are the men in Brighton blind to have not seen the treasure before them?"

"I am educated, Katrina. Well-read and assisted my father in many cases. Many men find that intimidating."

"Well, I for one am grateful for your presence. I will admit that my husband is hoping you can assist with the children at night. The youngest has trouble sleeping, and Michael wakes whenever I do."

"I'll do whatever I can but I should be closer to the nursery."

"The baby's bassinette is in our room, but we could move it into your sitting room if you were willing to take the night duty."

"Whatever it is you desire of me. I suggest you let me meet your little ones first."

"Freshen up. We'll eat dinner and tomorrow we can talk more about any duties you would assume and meet the children. Tonight, you can rest from your travels."

"But then you and your husband don't..."

Katrina smiled. "True, but with you here tomorrow we could always take a nap if we need to."

Silvia surveyed the room. "This is a lovely place. I appreciate your gracious hospitality."

With a hug, Katrina left Silvia to change, sending in a maid to assist.

Bruce awoke the next morning with a pounding head, fever, and intense abdominal pain. *Doctor, heal thyself.* He'd feared that with the little sleep and the amount of illness he'd been encountering, this might happen. He struggled out of bed and a wave of dizziness assailed him. He latched on to the post, managed to dress, and wandered to the kitchen where Mrs. Wilson prepared breakfast.

"Doctor?" his cook asked as she saw him enter and collapse in a chair.

"I'm sick," he rasped. "Willow bark tea if you would."

"Back to bed with you now and I'll bring up the tea. As a doctor you should know better than to be haring all over creation to take care of every little snuffle and hangnail. Plumb wore yourself out, you did." She shoed him out of the room and back up the stairs. He followed her orders and climbed back into bed, but still wearing his trousers and shirt. Soon the tea arrived, and he sipped it until it was gone. A cool compress was provided, and he was again left in blessed peace to rest.

~*~

Silvia enjoyed afternoon tea with Katrina. She'd met the children and took the grand tour of the home.

The butler came to the door. "Lady Remington to see you, ma'am."

"Show her in, Montague." Katrina replied.

A dark-haired woman burst into the room. "Katrina!" She stopped short at spying Silvia. "I forgot you were expecting company. I'm sorry to intrude."

"Lady Remington, let me introduce you to Miss Silvia Burnett from Brighton. Her father was a doctor there and recently passed away. She has come to stay with us to help with the children."

"Tis a pleasure to meet you, my lady," Silvia stood and curtsied.

"Please don't stand on ceremony with me. Sit. Sit. The daughter of a doctor, you say?"

Katrina frowned. "Yes. Why?"

"One of our staff has grown ill and we sent for Dr. Miller, but it seems he's fallen to the same illness spreading throughout the village and surrounding area. Marcus is inquiring about procuring someone else from another village, but it seems this illness is so widespread there are no doctors to spare."

"Your mother..." Katrina sympathized.

Lady Remington sniffed. "Yes. My mother died of influenza, so it has me at sixes and sevens over this. I worry for Dr. Miller as well. Who cares for the doctor when he is ill?"

Silvia frowned. "We experienced outbreaks of this in Brighton. I have helped my father treat this illness."

"Have you ever grown ill from it yourself?" Lady Remington asked.

"No. My father did once, and I nursed him back to health."

"Perhaps it is Providence that brings you here now. I am so sorry to hear of your loss. Your mother?"

"She died in childbirth twenty years ago, and my brother along with her."

"And you have no other family?" Lady Remington inquired.

"None close enough to provide shelter or assistance to me. I would like to help but it wouldn't be wise if I'm caring for Katrina's children as well."

"I can continue to care for my children if you can step in to help out with the issues in the village," Katrina reassured her. "But stepping into Doctor Miller's shoes is not without risk."

"True, but not if people seek me out. Do either of you have a stillroom where I could work?"

"We both have one, but they are unused and not well-stocked," Josie said.

"We've always relied on Dr. Miller for those things. There is no apothecary, so he compounds his own medications." Katrina added.

Silvia pursed her lips. "I would hate to intrude in his private space. I brought a few things with me from my father's still room. Perhaps I can start there before I bother the doctor while he recovers."

Lady Remington leaned forward. "Will you be able to come and help our servant? And perhaps check on Dr. Miller?"

"Servant, yes. Dr. Miller? Only with someone to accompany me lest he fear I'm entrapping him."

Katrina grinned. "You'd be perfect for him." She nudged Lady Remington. "Don't you think?"

"No matchmaking machinations from either of you."

"And why not? Wouldn't it be wonderful, Katrina? She understands about doctoring, and they are of a similar age."

Silvia shook her head. "Please. Stop. If I am to get a husband let it be in an honorable way."

"I can respect that. I hope none of the other single women try to render treatment to our poor ailing physician." Katrina sighed.

"You are incorrigible. Excuse me while I retrieve my bag. I can accompany Lady Remington home." Silvia rose, and with a small curtsy quit the room and went to her own suite.

She closed the door behind her, found the crate she sought, and began to put necessary items in her father's doctor bag. How was she to go about doing this as a single woman? It was highly improper.

Assisting women in giving birth was vastly different from listening to the lungs of a grown man. *Scandalous!*

Perhaps Sir Tidley or Lord Remington could think of a solution that would not include forcing Bruce to propose. While she hoped that he would be a suitable husband for her, she would never want him to regret or experience pressure to wed. Could future happiness ever be part of such a union?

She did, however, fully intend to minister to the needs of her ailing friend. She was duty-bound. She hoped he would not resent her interference in his life and work. While she was eager to help, she hoped that in doing so, she didn't scuttle her chances with him.

Her bag packed, redingote and hat on, she took measured steps down the stairs trying to calm her nerves. She entered the drawing room and the women stood.

"I am ready to depart whenever you are, Lady Remington."

Katrina smiled. "Silvia, I am so glad you are willing to help. It's as if God planned the perfect time for you to arrive."

"Perhaps so." Silvia squared her shoulders as Lady Remington put on her hat.

"Let us depart with all haste. We'll find someone to accompany you to Dr. Miller's. Perhaps my husband, since he and Bruce knew each other at University. It was Marcus who invited Bruce to take up the practice in Didcot."

"Michael was acquainted with him there as well." Katrina stated. "Dr. Miller has been a blessing to us all, in and out of the sickroom. I pray you can help him, Silvia." Katrina gave her friend a hug. "Here you've just arrived, and we've conscripted you into serving us all. Thank you for your willingness to do so."

"I was raised by a doctor, Katrina. I could do no less when the need is great." Silvia turned to follow Lady Remington to her carriage.

Once seated inside, Lady Remington turned to Silvia. "You've not said so, but I suspect you are acquainted with Dr. Miller."

"He trained with my father before moving her to take up his practice in Didcot."

"A mutual attraction?"

"Between he and I?" Silvia's hand went to her chest as her eyebrows rose.

"Yes."

Silvia sighed. "Attraction on my part, but we were younger. I cannot testify to his sentiments on the matter."

Lady Remington sat back and smiled but said nothing.

"What?" Silvia asked.

"You could bring him up to scratch by Christmas if you tried."

"I... I..."

“Exactly as I thought.”

“What did you think, my lady?”

“You protested too much when Katrina and I suggested matching you two.” She placed a hand on Silvia’s as it rested on the bag she carried. “Don’t be alarmed. But if one heart is engaged, the other might easily be led.”

“I’ve no assurance he remembers me or would welcome a wife who is a bluestocking.”

“And intelligent wife. Yes, such a curse for a learned man such as Dr. Miller.”

“You’re roasting me now.”

Lady Remington smiled. “But of course. We all adore Bruce and long for his happiness. Perhaps you will be the prescription the doctor requires. We shall discover that in due time, shall we not?”

“If you say so, my lady.”

“Josie, please.”

“Excuse me?”

“Call me Josie. I suspect we are all going to be great friends. May I call you Silvia?”

“Yes, but of course. Josie.”

“Very well. We’ll be to Rose Hill soon.”

Silvia relaxed against the squabs and prayed for wisdom. Was it possible she could help the sick in this community as a complement to Bruce’s work here? Fear tickled at the edge of her conscience. She was not formally trained, as it was illegal for women to be doctors. Was the surreptitious training her father had given her enough?” *Lord, help me.*

~*~

Silvia finished seeing to the ill servant and prescribed the care he would require to recover fully. Turning to the housekeeper she gave one last instruction. “Wash your hands. All of you. Before and after you leave this room and use soap. This will help him heal but also help prevent the spread of the illness if we are careful. She turned to wash her own hands with the soap to set an example for the staff.

“Yes, ma’am,” the servant said.

Silvia took her bag and quit the room to find her hostess. She set her bag on a chair in the hallway and entered the room. “Lady Remington...” She stopped short at seeing her hostess with a handsome, dark-haired gentleman.

“Miss Burnett, I assume?” the man asked.

“Yes...”

“Silvia, this is my husband, Lord Marcus Remington. He has agreed to accompany you to Dr. Miller’s.”

The man smiled down at his wife, and the affection between the

two of them was beautiful to witness. Perhaps someday...

"Lord Remington." She curtsied.

"We don't stand on ceremony here, Miss Burnett. It is a pleasure to meet you. Will our servant recover?" Lord Remington asked.

"I believe so. His case is not as severe as some I've seen, so hopefully he'll heal quickly. I left instructions for the staff as to his care."

"That is good to hear. Would you like some refreshment before we leave?"

"No. Thank you. I'd like to see Dr. Miller."

"Josie, we shall be off." He strode from the room calling for his coat and hat.

"Take care of Bruce, Silvia. I believe God had a perfect design in bringing you here." Josie came to clasp Silvia's hands. "I'll be praying for his health as well as both your hearts."

"Thank you, Josie." Silvia pulled away her hands and pivoted to leave the room. She grabbed her bag and followed the lord out of the manor to a handsomely appointed carriage. Lord Remington gave her his hand to assist her entry and then followed, sitting across from her.

The ride to the doctor's cottage was silent but for the clip-clop of the horses' hooves and the sound of the carriage wheels.

"We are here." Lord Remington stated as the carriage slowed before a modest home. A servant opened the door, and Lord Remington exited first and helped her down. She followed him to the door of the house which opened before he could knock.

"Good day, Mrs. Wilson, I've come to see how the doctor fares."

The door opened wider as the woman stood aside to allow them entrance into the cozy home. "Let me take your coats. His room is the first on the left as you reach the top of the stairs."

Both Lord Remington and Silvia handed off their coats and hats to the maid, and Silvia followed the handsome lord up the narrow stairs and into the darkened room.

"Bruce? It's Marcus."

"Marcus? Do viscounts make house calls now?" the doctor whispered.

"They do when a friend is ill. I brought someone who might be able to help you."

"Who?"

"'Tis I, Dr. Miller. Miss Burnett."

"Silvia Burnett?" His voice cracked.

"You are acquainted?" Marcus asked.

"He trained with my father in Brighton." She touched Bruce's forehead and fear clutched her heart. "Can you tell me what your symptoms are, Doctor?"

He pointed to his right side. "Fever and pain here. Can't keep food down."

She swallowed. This wasn't influenza. "Do you mind if I check the area?"

"Go ahead." He pulled down the blankets to reveal he wore a shirt and trousers. His hand came to rest on the spot. "Here." He pulled up the hem of the shirt to expose the area.

Silvia gently touched her hand to the skin. "You're burning with fever, Doctor. What have you taken for that?"

"Willow bark tea. Cold compresses. Water."

"A doctor following his own orders." Good. She pushed gently on the skin, and he yelped in pain. She removed her hand, pulled down the shirt, and brought the covers back up. "Have you read the writings of Dr. Parkinson out of London?"

"Of course. Even in this bucolic setting, I've stayed current on medical research."

"Do you remember anything recent in the past two or three years?"

"I was afraid that was the issue."

Lord Remington stepped forward. "It's not influenza?"

"No. Your friend here has a diseased organ called an appendix. It's small but the only treatment is surgical removal."

"And if it's not removed?" Lord Remington asked.

"Then you bury me," Bruce whispered.

"Who can we get to do this?" Remington inquired.

Silvia shook her head. "Even if you found a doctor in the nearby town, his disease is too far advanced to await treatment. I've read extensively about surgeries and my father, rest his soul, described procedures at length, and even showed me certain procedures using a pig, but I've never performed one myself."

Bruce glanced at her with glassy eyes. "I'd trust you. I'm not surprised your father taught you. He mentioned to me a few times how astute you were."

Tears sprang to her eyes. "You don't realize what you're asking." She sniffed.

"I do. I can remain awake to guide you."

"No. 'Twould be better if you slept through it. I despise causing you more pain."

"If it doesn't come out, the pain will worsen. I'll die."

"If I make a mistake, you may die anyway."

"Please, Silvia. Operate." Bruce grabbed her hand and swallowed hard. "I trust you and your training. It could burst."

She placed her free hand on his cheek. "How could I ever refuse you? Do you have a place for surgery? I'd hate to do it in your bed."

"Downstairs at the back of the cottage I have a table and all the instruments you'd require. You'll do it? Now?"

Silvia swallowed hard. "Yes. Did you get my letter?"

He grinned. "I did. Saucy woman."

"Good thing you're so ill, Doctor, or I might be tempted to slap you."

"Cut me open instead and get this festering organ out of me."

"Who normally assists you?"

"I don't have an assistant. Remy?" He turned to his friend. "Can you help?"

The lord's eyes were wide. He shook his head. "I can pray, but I can't watch this."

"Should he die, you'll not throw me in jail?" Silvia asked.

"No."

Her heart raced. "Well, perhaps you can help prepare him for surgery. Help him take care of any personal needs and get him downstairs to the room. Prayer would be welcome." She turned to Bruce. "I'll go boil the instruments."

The doctor smiled. "I knew I could trust you."

Silvia grabbed her bag and headed down the stairs to find the housekeeper and check out the operating room. *Lord, I could use some assistance. I've never had to cut into someone, and this is a man I've dreamed of for years. I couldn't live with myself should I do this and he not survive because of my failure. Please guide my hands!*

~*~

Doctor Miller emptied his stomach and his bladder and stumbled against his friend as they maneuvered the stairs.

"Are you sure about this, Bruce?" Marcus asked.

"Did I ever tell you about the girl I fell in love with once upon a time?"

"No. I don't think so. I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize, 'Twas Silvia. Promised I'd marry her someday. If I live through this, I might need to take a wife."

"You were never engaged, were you?"

"No."

"You have no obligation."

"Marcus. Didn't you notice how pretty she is? And intelligent? Why wouldn't I want to marry her?"

"Perhaps because right now you're mad with fever, and I'm beginning to think you're delusional too. You really want her to slice you open?"

"I'd trust her more than I would Doctor Mason a county over."

"Well, he does not do the profession proud I'll admit, but think, man. A woman operating? At least let her put you under."

Bruce shook his head. "No. And you need to stay in the room to help keep me from moving. Talk to me. You don't need to watch what she's doing. Help me ignore the pain."

"Something between your teeth to bite on?"

"Might help."

They arrived at the room.

Silvia was busy. "Put him on the table, Marcus and loosen his unmentionables." She came to Bruce's head as he reclined. "You are casting me out beyond the pale should this ever be discovered."

"I'm sorry."

Marcus loosening Bruce's trousers and Silvia donned an apron before washing her hands with soap and water.

She came to stand over Dr. Miller. "Lord Remington, could you leave the room for a moment?"

"Bruce?"

"Go ahead." Bruce stared up into her sapphire eyes.

"I'll be right outside the door." Marcus said as he exited.

"Do you really want to be awake?" Silvia asked as she leaned over him.

He nodded. "One final request?"

Her brows furrowed as she frowned. "What would that be?"

"Kiss me. *Please?*" It was a bold request. Undergoing this kind of procedure was risky in the best of times, and he was already so sick. Would she even consent to another scandalous request on his part? He'd always wondered if the magic of her kiss from years ago would be the same or better. Morbid thought, but he wanted to experience her kiss one more time...just in case he didn't survive. He swallowed hard.

"Excuse me?"

"We kissed once long ago when we made that promise. Kiss me again. Please?"

"We were young and naïve then. Now we have no excuse," she protested.

"But I very well may die here today. Would that you would afford me this slight grace."

Silvia swallowed, and her eyes filled with tears. She nodded and bent to gently meet his lips. *Oh, sweet heaven.* For a moment all pain was gone and only that momentary bliss. He should feel guilty for extracting a kiss from her in such a manner, but he couldn't regret it.

She pulled back. "I've become quite scandalous since I arrived in town. Are you certain you want me to—"

"I trust you. Strap me down before you start."

She did as he bid.

"Lord Remington, you may return," she called out. "Your

presence might save what little reputation I'll have left."

Marcus reentered the room.

"Put that rolled up cloth in his mouth. We don't want him screaming to wake the dead in the cemetery down the street," Silvia said.

"I think you rate my powers too highly, Miss Burnett. What else can I do?" Marcus asked.

"Pray, and keep him focused on you. Talk to him. Sing. I don't care as long as he doesn't move."

Marcus moved to place his hands on Bruce's shoulders—a comforting weight.

Silvia cleansed his skin and the pain caused him to shudder.

"Stay still, Bruce," she scolded.

The knife appeared in his peripheral vision, and he closed his eyes in anticipation of the pain to come.

She lowered the blade to his skin.

Silvia took a deep breath and gently touched the skin to palpitate it. She found the spot and made the first slice. She tried to ignore the whimpers from Bruce and focused on her task.

Inside she trembled. She'd never done anything of the like before, and reading about it bore no kin to the real agony she experienced along with Bruce. Her soul was pierced with his pain, and she fought against the tears. This was a man she had loved. If anything went wrong, how would she live with herself? *Lord, please help me. I can't do this.* She paused, biting her lip. *Focus on the task, not the pain.* It was as if she could hear her father's voice urging her on. This was no time to dally.

Remembering her father's anatomy books and his descriptions with a clarity that surprised her, Silvia removed the diseased organ, stitched him up, and closed the skin with small even stitches before applying a salve and bandage. Only then did she look at the face of the man she'd silently loved for years. Tears had traveled down the side of his face.

"It's over. I'm done."

Lord Remington stood, removing the cloth from between his friend's teeth. Tears ran down his own cheeks in empathy for the pain of his friend. "He lost consciousness."

"Probably a good thing, except we need to get him back to his room. Those stairs are narrow, do you think between the two of us...?" She moved the bloody utensils and clothes to the side and wiped the table clean before scrubbing the blood from her hands. "Could you untie the restraints for me?"

"Gladly. I think we can get him up there. Perhaps my footman outside would help?"

"I'd like to keep him upright for the journey—you on one side of him and your footman on the other. It'll mean dragging his feet up the stairs but if you're careful I think it can be done without hurting him further."

"I believe we can manage that."

She glanced at Lord Remington. He appeared pale. "Take a seat and put your head down. You won't be much help if you pass out."

Her own tears flowed now, having been held back during the surgery. Her side ached as if she'd been the one sliced into. She doubted she'd ever be able to perform surgery with impunity. Even when her father had demonstrated surgeries using a live pig, she'd squirmed as if she were the patient. He told her it was evidence of her compassionate heart, which was as important in the healing process as skill or knowledge. "But a lack of skill could kill someone!" she would

respond. He'd gently pat her shoulder and tell her he was proud of her.

Would you be proud of me tonight, Father? She sighed. Her hands shook as she dried them. She held them in front of her and watched the tremors.

"Are you well?" Lord Remington inquired.

"Unnerved. I've never needed to slice someone open before, and to do it to..."

"Someone you love."

She turned to stare at the lord. "How...?"

"He mentioned it when you left the bedroom. He said that's why he trusted you. Because he loved you and you cared about him."

A soft smile played on her lips as she came to stand by Bruce's head. "Oh, he did, did he?" She caressed Bruce's cheek before checking his pupils and pulse. "We can move him now. Are you well enough?"

Lord Remington stood and came to the other side of the table. "Are you?"

"I'm stronger than I appear. On three. One, two, three." They lifted Bruce to a sitting position, and she maneuvered his legs to hang off the table. Silvia held him up as Marcus went to get a footman to assist with the journey upstairs. When he returned, each man placed one of Bruce's arms around each of their necks and, supporting him, they managed to carry him up the stairs and back into bed.

Silvia covered him with a woolen blanket and checked his forehead. "I need to go clean up the surgery. Can you watch over him? I'll return with some willow bark tea."

"No laudanum?" Marcus asked.

She shook her head. "Nasty stuff. I'd rather suggest brandy but regardless, he'll be hurting for some time. He'll not be traveling on horseback for weeks, nor should he be carrying anything heavy. He understands the limitations, but will he abide by them?"

Lord Remington pulled up a chair and sat. "Thank you, Miss Burnett."

"For what?"

"Taking care of my friend."

She nodded and left the room as Marcus bent his head as if in prayer.

Back in the surgery she cleaned the instruments and scrubbed the table and everything else. She tossed the bloodied rags in a bucket filled with water to soak. She then took a little tour around his surgery and attached stillroom. Dr. Miller had a selection of herbal supplements and a book describing treatments. If he would allow her assistance while he healed, everything she needed was here. She was

impressed. "Papa, you'd be proud of the doctor Bruce became."

Finding the kitchen, she retrieved the hot water, cups and teas including the willow bark. She'd get that in him once it cooled off a little, even if he remained unconscious. She took the steps carefully. Arriving in the room she placed the tray on a table and began to pour tea for Marcus and Bruce. She handed the tea to Marcus. "Here. Fortify yourself a little before you return home."

She went back for her own cup while Bruce's steeped. She sipped, relishing the burn of the hot water as a way to sooth her anxiety over Bruce's welfare.

"Shall I take you back to Michael and Katrina's soon?"

"I'll remain here."

"Why?"

"His recovery isn't certain. I would see him break this fever before I'd be comfortable leaving him. He has no one to nurse him, so I will do it."

"It is improper. His cook has gone home for the evening."

"Do you really think he'll debauch me in his current condition, Lord Remington?"

"No, but I still don't like it. Should word get out you'd be compromised and forced to wed."

"My reputation has been compromised, my lord, simply by performing surgery. Oh, maybe if I'd stitched up his finger, society wouldn't pause for a moment, but his appendix? No, my lord. I'm already ruined in the eyes of society, should I be discovered, but it is worth it if he can recover. And besides, do you think I'm the sort to force a man to marry me, for propriety's sake?"

Marcus stood, motioning for her to take the chair he'd occupied. He sipped his coffee and considered her as he wandered to the other side of the bed. "I'll send a footman and a maid to assist you. You're a brave and intriguing woman, Miss Burnett."

"I think by now you can call me Silvia. I doubt your wife would mind."

"Silvia. I believe Bruce is fortunate in his choice of...*friends*."

"He often spoke highly of you. Bruce grew up further afield, didn't he?"

"Yes, but for the sake of friendship, he was willing to settle here. He doesn't visit his family often."

"And he's not been snagged by any local beauty?"

"No. He's been too busy, either caring for the sick or studying, to be courting."

"That's a sad life."

Marcus frowned. "I've never considered it. I've been so wrapped up in my own life that I never even thought about how lonely he

might be. I assumed he preferred it that way.”

“Maybe he does. Don’t berate yourself. You are friends, and he could come to you if he needed anything, including companionship.”

“He’s always welcome at Rose Hill.”

“Bruce is fortunate in his friends.” She set down her cup and turned to get her patient’s tea prepared. Coming around to the bed again she sat the teacup down on the nightstand. “Can you lift him a little?”

Marcus did as she asked.

Carefully, she tipped the cup into Bruce’s mouth, closing it before it could dribble out, he swallowed, and she repeated the process several more times. “You can lay him back down. We’ll give him more in a little bit if he doesn’t wake up on his own.”

“Are you certain you want to remain here tonight? As I mentioned, his maid-of-all-work, Mrs. Wilson, is gone for the night. If you stay, you’ll be alone.”

“I have a gun in my bag and am trained in how to use it.”

The lord’s eyes grew wide.

“I don’t anticipate trouble. I learned to shoot in case I needed to defend myself. I’ll lock the door. Tell Katrina where I am, so she doesn’t worry.”

Marcus set down his empty cup. “I’ll depart and send help as soon as I can. I’m not happy with this, but when Josie was bedridden, I stayed by her side, praying. I understand your need to be here.”

“Thank you, Lord Remington.”

“Marcus. Thank you, Silvia, for everything.”

He stepped out of the room, and she followed. Once he donned his hat and coat he gave her a nod and departed. After the footman arrived, she locked the door behind him and returned to the bedroom to watch over her patient. It would be a long night.

She stood at the window to watch the falling snow. Her first Christmas without her father was on the horizon. She couldn’t have borne it if she’d lost Bruce as well. She swallowed hard as the reality of what she’d done weighed her down. Bruce wasn’t out of the woods yet. She needed to make sure he survived.

~*~

His heavy lids didn’t want to open, but a gentle hand placed a cool compress on his head. He wondered who it was. When it was removed he shivered. A hand came to his neck and lifted him. Tea passed between his lips. He drank it eagerly. Willow bark. Just what he’d prescribe if he were treating himself. *Wait. Something happened.* He tried to move, and sharp pain came from his side. He forced his eyes to open as his head rested back on the pillow. The flaxen-haired miss gave him a smile. “Hello, Bruce.”

“Silvia?”

“Yes. Rest. You need to heal. Your fever broke which is wonderful. It means the surgery was successful.”

His hand went to the bandaged area. It was cool to the touch and while it hurt, it wasn't as bad as before. “You really did it?”

She nodded. “Hardest thing I think I've ever done.”

“I believed in you.”

“Heaven knows why.”

He grinned. “Where's Marcus?”

“He departed hours ago.”

“What time is it?”

“Close to two in the morning.”

“You stayed here alone?”

“Marcus sent a footman and a maid from Rose Hill.” She pointed to the man sleeping on a pallet in the corner.

He tried to move and groaned. “I need to relieve myself.”

She helped him sit up and got him to his feet.

He sucked in a deep breath and leaned against her, breathing heavily. Within seconds, he righted himself, but kept an arm around her shoulders.

She walked him to an area behind a screen. “Can you manage from here? I'll be close by.”

“Yes.” Once he finished and secured his trousers he leaned against the wall. “How much tea have you poured into me?”

She gave a low chuckle. “Enough to take the edge off your pain. Or would you prefer brandy?” She came to put an arm around him to help him back to bed. He reclined, and she covered him up again.

“No laudanum?”

“You disdain the drug and although you will prescribe it in certain situations I was not sure you would want to use it, so I chose the willow bark for now. If you rest for a few days, you might be able to make it without anything more than that.”

“You understand me well.”

“It's been years, but I remember.”

“I'm hungry.”

“I can get you some food. Do you promise to stay put?”

“Can't risk ripping out those perfect stitches now, can I?” He grinned.

“Perfect? I might have left you with a grotesque scar.”

“Not you. I've seen your embroidery. You seek perfection, and I'd be surprised if I found anything less.”

“Flattery will get you some food. Let me search the pantry.”

“Thank you, Silvia.”

“You're welcome, Bruce.”

She left the room taking with her the tea tray and a candle. He was surprised he felt so much better so soon. He realized that infection could still occur, but he'd observed her procedure in preparing for the surgery. He doubted any further illness would befall him.

~*~

Two days later, and Silvia finally left her patient's bedside as Marcus provided a footman to help the good doctor when he needed anything. Arriving back at Hart Manor, she was greeted warmly by Katrina.

"Silvia, you must be exhausted. I'll call for a bath and dinner served in your room. Sitting in a chair for two days straight taking care of an invalid must have been trying."

Yawning, Silvia nodded. "I am exhausted, but 'twas no bother."

Katrina's eyes twinkled. "You like him, don't you?"

"We're old acquaintances."

"Hmmm. Well, go, rest, and we'll talk more in the morning."

Silvia entered her room, and a bath was soon brought up. She indulged in the warm water and washed her hair. Sitting by the fire while it dried, she enjoyed the meal prepared by the Tidley's fine chef. The last two days she'd been more focused on getting Bruce to eat and hadn't partaken much for herself. She'd read to him. They'd discussed medical treatments and talked about their faith. She smiled at the memory. Maybe God was orchestrating all this to fulfill her heart's desire.

She snuggled into her bed and relaxed, dreaming of kisses and friendship that warmed her from the inside out.

The next morning, she rushed through her ablutions and checked her bag to ensure she had restocked her supplies. Dr. Miller had given permission for her to take things from his still room for her tinctures. Dressed in her plainest black mourning dress, she headed to the breakfast parlour to eat before setting out to check up on the Remington's sick servant.

"Good morning, Miss Burnett," Sir Michael greeted her. "I understand you'll be absconding with a carriage and groom to take you on a tour around the countryside."

"I wasn't planning to take in any sights today." She peered outside. "Besides it appears to be a bit dreary out."

"It does. A better choice would be to sit with a good book by the fire."

"Perhaps later if I can return soon enough to do so. I need to check on the Remington servant this morning, to see how he fares."

"Remington told me you did the surgery on Dr. Miller."

Katrina walked into the room. "That is not proper breakfast

conversation.”

He grinned at his bride. “You’re not curious about how she managed to save Bruce’s life? She’s been away more than she’s been here. When else would you get the tale? Or is she to write us a missive to read in her absence?”

“No gory details. Was it difficult?”

“I was terrified,” Silvia admitted. “I made Lord Remington promise not to jail me if the good doctor died because of a mistake I might make.”

Katrina nodded. “There are many sick people in town. My maid told me that word of your help has spread. We’ve already had people coming to our door seeking your care in Dr. Miller’s absence. There is a list of people who have requested you to visit. Are you certain this is what you want to do?”

“Dr. Miller needs to rest. I could do no less for him. I would hate to hear of anyone dying because I was more interested in my comfort.”

“May God watch over you as you go,” Michael said. “I’ll make sure the carriage is at the door for you.”

“Thank you.” Silvia drank the rest of her tea and patted her mouth with her napkin. “I anticipate long talks when this illness has passed, and time playing with your children.”

Katrina tilted her head and considered her friend. “I do, too. I wonder if your helping is a way to avoid facing your grief.”

Like a blow to the gut, Silvia fought to breathe. Her friend was closer to the truth than she realized. Keeping busy was a way to tamp all the emotions that threatened to rise to the surface. “Perhaps so, dear friend, but even if it weren’t...I owe it to Bruce and my father to continue the work they prepared me for.”

“I understand. Go with God, and take care. Return any time during the day if you need a respite. Don’t forget that we long to serve you too. I didn’t extend an invitation so you could work, but so that we could provide a safe place for you to grieve.”

Silvia swallowed hard. “I know,” she whispered, “and I am grateful. You always were the best of friends.” Rising to her feet she exited the room. Michael assisted her with her cloak as the weather looked to be damp.

“Be well,” the knight admonished.

“I’ll do my best. Thank you, Michael.” With that she was out the door.

She entered Rose Hill through the kitchen door, and a maid escorted her to check on the sick servant.

“Well, Max,” she said after she examined him. “I believe in another day or two you’ll be ready to resume your duties.”

“Thank ye, miss.”

“The cough may remain for some time but I don’t believe you are contagious. Washing hands for you and everyone else, though, can help prevent or reduce the incident of more illness.”

“Yes, miss.”

Silvia departed the premises and went on her way to the next home on the list of Bruce’s patients.

An older man answered the door to a cottage. He frowned upon seeing her and her bag.

“Mr. Brown? I’m Miss Burnett. I’m here to check on your wife. Dr. Miller is unwell.”

“A woman physic? I don’t think so.” The door slammed in her face.

She knocked again.

The door swung open but now the man held a rifle. “I told you to leave.”

“I am capable of attending to your wife, sir. My father was a doctor, and I’ve been caring for Dr. Miller in his illness as well.”

“And he’s not here, is he?” He huffed. “Fine. Come in.”

When she finished, she went to the next home. Although for the most part they had requested her presence, they were guarded. She couldn’t blame them. She was a stranger and a woman. Why did she think she could handle this task? With her list completed to the best of her ability, she made Dr. Miller her last stop.

Bruce startled when Silvia entered his room. He was sitting up in bed, reading.

“Dr. Miller. You should be resting. I’ve come to check your incision and see how you fare,” she scolded.

He didn’t mind. It meant she cared. He put down the book. “Ah, my angel of mercy.” He slid under the covers, grimacing in pain.

“I warned you to be careful.” She pulled back the sheet and raised his shirt.

She removed the bandage and checked the wound. Even he could observe healthy pink skin knitting together under her tidy stitches. Her touch was gentle. She cleansed the area, applied a balm, and re-bandaged it.

“It is healing well.” She sat on the side of the bed to check his temperature and pulse. “Still no fever. Good. Your pulse seems rapid.”

“Maybe that’s because your very touch sets my heart racing.” He wasn’t lying. He wanted more of her touch and recalled her kiss before his surgery. His gaze rested on her lips.

She glanced to the nightstand where a bottle of brandy was. “Hmmm. You’ve taken to self-medicating?”

He shrugged. “I was bored, lonely, and in pain,” he whined. “I admit I went downstairs but was shooed back up here. What did you tell Mrs. Wilson to put her in such a dither? She almost chased me with the broom to get me back in my room.”

“All for the benefit of your healing.” Her soft smile enchanted him.

“You made many visits, I hear. How did they fare?”

She sighed. “They were desperate, or they’d never have allowed me in their homes. You are a much-loved doctor and I’m nobody. I should have anticipated it. Who was I to think I could do a man’s job? Vain and foolish of me. I’m sorry I failed you.”

He frowned. “Failed? You saved my life. Rest and relax. Once they realize how much they need you, they’ll find themselves grateful for your ministrations.” He longed to hold her and comfort her. Why had he never sought her out in the years since those youthful promises? The fact that he hadn’t shamed him. There was much for which to atone. He clasped her hand and gave it a squeeze.

She blinked rapidly as though staving off tears. He longed to take away her hurt.

She removed her hand and stood. “I should depart. I’m glad you’re recovering. I’ll return in a few days. If you need me sooner send someone for me.”

An ache grew in his heart. “You won’t visit me tomorrow?”

"You are healing well. There isn't much more I can do to speed that process along."

"I miss you." There. He'd said it. Maybe the alcohol gave him the courage, but the two days and nights she'd spent by his side had been precious and filled an empty space in his life he'd ignored for too long. "We never talked about your letter."

"You held my undivided attention for two days without bringing it up. It was foolishness for me to write. Please forgive my *faux pas* in even doing so."

"I'm a man who keeps his promises."

"We were young, and I should have never extracted such from you."

"I didn't give my word under coercion. If I remember correctly, it was me who suggested it."

"You've been ill and you're lonely. Understandable given the amount of work you've done lately. You need rest." She grabbed her bag.

"You're avoiding the issue."

"What issue?"

"Marrying me."

She shook her head. "Bruce, you've never proposed, so marriage is not something to discuss. You're being influenced by brandy and the extended time we've been together under adverse conditions. I would not make you a comfortable wife."

"Depends on the kind of comfort." He delighted in seeing her cheeks turn pink. "I would guess the memory of our kiss has not left you unaffected. It's not something I can easily disregard."

"Rest well, Dr. Miller." She pivoted and left the room taking all the warmth with her.

Bruce closed his eyes and groaned. Opening them he reached for the glass of amber liquid and managed to take a sip. The warmth brought at least some relief from the ache in his side, but couldn't do much for the ache in his heart. How did one woo a woman while confined to bed? *Lord, help me.*

~*~

Marcus visited the next morning. "How are do you fare, Bruce?"

"My health is improving. Silvia's skill was bang-up-to-the-mark."

"I sense some melancholia in your words."

"You remember how helpless it was when you were confined to chambers even after they brought you home from that brutal fight and Josie was nowhere around."

"Ah, so it's not boredom that has you blue-deviled, it's the ministrations of Miss Burnett you long for."

"Guilty as charged. Marcus, if she hadn't come to town when she

did—”

“You might not have survived.”

Bruce swallowed hard. “Yes. And I enjoy her company more than any other woman I’ve ever encountered.”

“You’ve not spent much time courting any women from what I’ve witnessed.”

“True, but she was a friend when I trained with her father. I was enamored of her, then and since. She was too young, and I wasn’t established. Distance and time spent establishing my practice forced my affections for her into the back of my mind. I never believed I was worthy of her.”

“And you admired her father.”

“He was my mentor after school. I learned much from him.”

“And nothing from her?”

“Even then she possessed more knowledge of some aspects of medicine than I did. She was amazing, beautiful, and she adored me.”

“Why didn’t you propose?”

“I had nothing to offer.”

“You had a job and a home secured.”

“No patients.”

“It took time to earn the trust of the village, but you wouldn’t have been alone.”

“For all that schooling, I wasn’t very smart.”

“Love makes fools of us all sometimes.”

“Am I a hopeless case?”

“You’ve heard all our journeys to the altar: how I lost Josie’s trust, how Michael abandoned his wife after a horrible courtship, how Phillip married and then fell in love.”

“Theo, too. What a twisted journey his was chasing down the Black Diamond.”

“Right, and then Jared, finding love in Scotland while on assignment.”

“Guess my story is not as dramatic as all those.”

“No, but that doesn’t minimize the struggle you’ll endure to win her heart.”

“I thought I already had it. Did I tell you she wrote me a letter before arriving here?”

Marcus’s eyebrows rose. “No...”

“Years ago, I promised her that if I was available and she was yet unwed at five and twenty, we would marry.”

“What would possess you to do something so foolish?”

“Love. She was too young, and so was I. She’s so lovely I had no doubt someone would have married her by now.”

“You were willing to let her go?”

“Not really...and I’ve buried myself in my patients and my books to try to forget her.”

Marcus remained silent.

“I received her letter before she arrived. I was so excited to see her again. I thought maybe my lonely nights were over.” Bruce sighed. “Not as though I could act on anything right now, should I even desire it.”

“Maybe that’s a good thing. You’ve time to get reacquainted and discover if this is really the woman God has called to be your wife.”

“She is. She understands the work. She’d be a wonderful partner in every way.”

“She wrote to you but is not falling at your feet?”

“Silvia”—he closed his eyes to remember her kiss—“doesn’t want to rush anything and is lacking confidence given the reluctant reception by the villagers as she’s tried to help them.”

“That will take time to change.”

“Pray for me and her, will you?”

“Absolutely.”

~*~

Silvia spent most of her nights and some of her evenings in the nursery with the children. Exhaustion plagued her. Michaela was a little spitfire much like her mother and Adam was beginning to walk and chase after his sister, and possessed Michael’s cheeky attitude. The baby, Georgina, was sweet-tempered and while she didn’t need to eat at night, was often awaking and needing comfort due to teething pain. Katrina was a doting mother and Michael often played with his children. She suspected that both would have their hands full when these little ones grew older. She grinned as the baby giggled in her arms. “Oh, you are a sweet little thing, aren’t you?”

The baby drooled and batted at Silvia’s face as the younger two chased each other around the nursery. There was a maid who worked with the children, but it was Silvia who took the nights with the youngest child, having the bassinet in her room so that Katrina and Michael could sleep. She would rock the little girl through her teething pain and weep along at her failure to assist Bruce. Would she ever experience this kind of joy for herself?

He said he wanted to marry me, but he has a misplaced gratitude for saving his life.

I saved his life. I’m not a failure. I did at least one thing well.

More than that. I helped those who sought me out.

And yet, my role is here in the shadows with a child. This is important too, isn’t it?

When the children didn’t need her, she hid away. Sleeping, reading, and avoiding her friend who was far too perceptive for

Silvia's liking.

A week later, she dragged herself from hiding to go visit her patient. After all, she'd promised she would.

December 1815

Bruce was at his wit's end. Messages continued to be delivered asking for him to help those who were sick, but he couldn't. He needed to heal, but day after day the callers kept coming, and Remington's footman turned them away.

Resting in his favorite chair downstairs by the fireplace, comfort escaped him as he tried to read. What kind of doctor was he that he couldn't tend his patients?

A knock came to the door. A footman ushered a man into the room.

"Good day, Mr. Haas," Bruce said, choosing to stay seated. "What brings you by?"

"I wanted to lodge a complaint about that Miss Burnett who is doctoring in town. It should not be tolerated in our peaceful village."

"I thought she cared for your wife last week. Has Mary taken a turn for the worse?"

"No. She fares well. But it isn't proper for a woman to practice medicine."

Bruce closed his eyes and sighed. "There was naught I could do for you. Miss Burnett is the daughter of the man who taught me about medicine. She is highly skilled."

"We wanted you."

"I almost died, and she tended to me. I am unable to leave the house while I heal. Miss Burnett was willing to step in—at a considerable risk to her own reputation—and visit patients. If you want to lodge a complaint then go to Lord Remington. He's the magistrate."

The older man blinked rapidly.

Bruce pushed himself up, grimacing all the way and shuffled out of the room. The stairs were a trial. Once back in bed he cursed himself for making the journey downstairs much less inviting the man inside although it was the footman who'd ushered him in. He hated that people were questioning Miss Burnett's capabilities, but there was naught he could do.

Marcus came to visit him a short time later. "How do you fare, Bruce?"

"I thought I was well enough to go downstairs. I am paying for my foolishness."

"So, doctor's orders are only to be obeyed if they come from a doctor?"

"Touché. I knew better."

"I come bearing bad news."

"What have you heard?"

"I've had a slew of complaints regarding Miss Burnett doctoring in town. She's not done more than take temperatures and prescribe hand-washing and natural treatments, so she's not broken any laws so much as curtsied across them. She's not compounding medications or performing surgeries. And she's saved lives. I'm merely unsure how to handle the complaints. The easiest would be for you to recover and resume your duties. How has Miss Burnett been doing given the reluctance of the townsfolk? Has she been to visit you?"

"Not for some time. I think I blew my chance with her."

"I doubt it."

"I'm tired, Marcus. I appreciate you stopping by."

"Rest well, my friend." Lord Remington left shutting the bedroom door softly behind him.

~*~

Silvia longed for a walk to burn off pent up energy, so she grabbed her coat and hat and took off on foot for Dr. Miller's home in the village. The day had turned windy, and she held tight to her coat almost wishing she'd though to bring warmer gloves to wear. Dusk had begun to fall by the time she reached the village. Of necessity, she'd need to make her visit a quick one.

As she strode down the street toward the cottage, a carriage pulled up next to her. The door swung open. "Miss Burnett!" Sir McElroy called.

Oh, bother! She turned. "What brings you to Didcot, Sir McElroy?"

"Why you, my dear. I missed you terribly as you certainly must realize."

"It's cold and I'm on an errand. I can't stand in the street talking."

"I'll give you a ride."

"I'm at my destination. Good day." She strode up the walk to Dr. Miller's abode and knocked on the door. When the footman opened it, and she slipped quickly inside. "I'll keep my coat on. I'm quite chilled." She headed up the stairs and knocked on the door.

A weak "Come in," was the response from her patient.

She left the door open, and the footman came to stand outside.

"How do you fare, Doctor Miller?"

"Much better now that you are here. I thought I heard voices out the window."

"Yes, someone passing through town stopped me on my walk here."

"Isn't it too cold to be walking?"

"I needed the exercise. You avoided my question."

"I ache, but it is my own fault for venturing downstairs."

Silvia frowned. "Disobeying your own orders? You knew the risks, and now you pay the price." She checked his forehead and the incision, having left supplies there. "Everything is healing well. You'll be downstairs soon enough. It's frustrating, but you need time to heal."

He grabbed for her hand as she rose to leave. "Stay for a while," he implored.

"I left late, and it's getting dark. I must go."

He frowned but released her hand. "I'd like it if you visited more often."

"Coming here alone at all is highly improper."

"You are walking home? Alone?"

"Seemed a shame to bring a maid out for my need to stretch my legs."

"Be safe."

"I carry a gun."

"I'd feel better if you let the footman retrieve a carriage for you."

"A waste of time. I'll be home before he'd return. No more stalling. Good night, Bruce." With that she exited. She glanced out the front window to find McElroy's carriage still in front of the house. She strode to the kitchen to Mrs. Wilson. "Is there a back exit and path to take me back to Hart Manor?"

"Yes, ma'am." The woman gave her directions and Silvia gratefully slipped out the back door, through the garden, and made her way home without any further encounter with Sir McElroy.

As she entered the manor, Sir Tidley strode toward her. "Silvia? You went out?"

"Just to check on Doctor Miller. I needed the walk."

"Your cheeks are red." He grabbed a hand. "Your fingers are like ice. Montague?" He turned to the butler. "Send a bath and tea to Miss Burnett's room."

"You needn't trouble yourself, Michael."

"Yes, I do. Now go, get warm. Last thing we'd want is for you to grow ill."

She nodded and took the stairs. Upon entering her room, she lit the fire and stood there, still in her coat as she tried to warm up.

Katrina bustled in. "Silvia? Michael told me you walked to Dr. Miller's. Whyever for? We have a carriage and groom you are welcome to use."

"I needed to be moving."

"It's hard being cooped up in the nursery. You're used to a far more active life."

Silvia shrugged. "I used to accompany my father on many of his visits. It doesn't speak highly of my future that I can't be content in

the nursery.”

“It’s different when it’s your own child. Did I ever share with you all that happened after my father died? How I met Michael?”

“No.”

“Well, you’d likely not believe that I could have such high adventures and terrible trauma, but I did. Michael and I had our adventures and tragedies and are content here. I would never have expected him to enjoy this life, but he seems happy, as am I.”

Shaking her head, Silvia reached out to grab her friend’s hand. “I never realized how difficult your life had been. I’m sorry you needed to endure all that.”

“I could give you more details but for now it’s enough. So, don’t lose hope. Someday, with the right man, you might find raising your children to be enough of an adventure.”

The water was brought in for a bath as was the tea tray. Katrina poured tea for Silvia. “Here. Warm up, and don’t worry so much. I suspect you’ll find yourself busy enough once the village folk realize how valuable you can be to them.”

“I forgot to mention, when I was in town I was accosted by Sir McElroy.”

“Your persistent and unwanted suitor?”

Silvia nodded and sipped her tea. “I slipped out the back door to avoid him on the way home, but I fear he’ll discover my location soon enough.”

“And how was Bruce?”

“Frustrated and in pain. He tried to do more than he should. Silly man.”

Katrina grinned. “Oftentimes they are, but for all that, I adore mine.”

Silvia set her tea down. “I’d better use that water before it gets cold.”

Her hostess rose. “I’ll be praying for you.”

“Thank you,” Silvia closed and locked the door and proceeded to undress and warm up in the hot water.

Once dressed again, she dried her hair by the fire. She missed traveling about and meeting with patients. *Lord, what am I to do? Is this my life once Bruce is well enough to work? Please help me be content in my circumstances.*

She had dinner sent to her room and was soon in charge of little Georgina who miraculously slept through the night.

The next morning in the breakfast parlour, Sir Michael sat and cleared his throat as Silvia and Katrina partook of their meal.

“Michael?” Katrina inquired.

“I’ve received some bad news.”

“This isn’t the time or place,” his wife admonished.

“When you are both finished, come to my study.” He picked up his coffee and plate and quit the room.

Katrina’s eyes widened at her husband’s abrupt departure. “Must be terrible if he would leave like that.” She swallowed the rest of her tea and turned to Silvia. “Are you ready?”

Curiosity ate at her from within as fear entangled her ribcage making it hard to breathe. *Please don’t let it be Bruce!* She nodded to her friend and both rose to walk to the study.

The door closed behind them, and Michael stood and came from around his desk, abandoning his food and beverage for the nonce. “Please, sit.”

Katrina sat on a loveseat and patted the spot next to her. Michael joined her there, and Silvia sat across from them.

“What happened?” Katrina asked.

Michael grasped his wife’s hand and squeezed it tight. “Silvia, Bruce has been extolling your virtues, and new requests are coming here for you to tend to some of those who are very ill. Bruce sent a note round to us, concerned that even if you were to render treatment now, these people might not survive, which will make it harder for you to earn their trust.”

“What am I to do? I can’t refuse to go. Maybe I couldn’t save all, but I might save some.”

“It won’t matter in the eyes of the village. They now view you as their possible savior from this epidemic.”

“Silvia can’t traipse about without a guard.” Katrina stated.

“Right. Sir McElroy has come to town as well. How do you want me to handle him, Silvia?”

“What can anyone do? He has a right to travel where he will, but I’d prefer he be denied entrance here.”

Michael frowned. “I can deny him visiting you, but it would be rude to not allow him once, if he chooses to call upon me. If he does, perhaps I can discourage his suit.”

“The man is obtuse. You could hit him with a beam about the head and shoulders, and he’d still not understand that I do not want to marry him.”

Katrina gave a little chuckle.

“What’s so funny?” Michael asked.

"We have one man who can't be brought up to scratch and another we can't get to stop. Silvia, if you thought your life was boring, you couldn't have been more wrong."

"Bruce did propose."

"What?" Both Katrina and Michael stated at once.

"He wasn't serious and feels indebted because I saved his life."

"You turned him down?" Katrina gasped.

Silvia nodded.

"You'd be perfect for him."

"Maybe so, but I could not in good conscience accept a proposal when he was in such a state."

Katrina leaned over to Michael and kissed his cheek. "We understand exactly of what you speak, but that's a story for another time."

Silvia rose. "I suppose I should prepare to visit the patients."

"You'll take a groom and carriage and stay armed. I insist that you return before dark," Michael stated.

Katrina slapped his arm. "You are not her father." She turned to Silvia. "Don't be offended, he was as high-handed with me before we wed. It only means he cares. We want you safe, and you'll need to return for supper. We'll take care of the children again, so you can rest."

"Georgina slept through the night. The tooth broke through and she's much happier now."

Both parents grinned.

"Wonderful!" Michael cheered. "I hope that lasts."

"I will take every precaution not to bring illness to your house." Silvia quit the room to ready her things.

~*~

Silvia soon discovered that while some of her patients were willing to allow her entrance, they were reluctant to follow her advice and demanded guarantees of recovery.

"Mr. Jones. I can only help your wife and daughter be comfortable. The disease is well-advanced now." She prescribed things for him to do, but his grumbling led her to believe he wouldn't follow through. "If you value the lives of your wife and daughter you will do as I recommend. While I cannot guarantee their recovery, I am giving you everything I can to ensure their best chances of surviving this and hopefully keep you from getting ill yourself if you haven't already contracted the illness."

"I'm healthy as can be," the man boasted.

"In this moment, that may be true, but this disease is cunning. You could be infected and not showing symptoms yet."

His eyes wide he nodded. "I'll do as ye say."

“Good. I pray they will all be healthy soon, but true healing is in God’s hands not mine.”

“Is it true you operated on the doctor?”

So, the word had spread. “He was deathly ill, but is recovering well. Healing takes time, and he cannot be out and about to care for patients right now nor in his home.”

The man nodded and escorted her to the door. Exiting, she was struck by the force of the biting wind. The sky had grown dark. She entered the carriage and Jimmy, her groom for the day, leaned in. “I’s need to return to the manor now, Miss. Sir Tidley’s orders.”

She nodded. The poor young man had been bearing the brunt of the weather as had the horses. She reviewed her list of people to visit and wondered how Bruce had managed. She’d get an earlier start on the morrow.

~*~

Day after day, it was the same routine. Rise early, dress, eat, and depart to travel around the village. Christmas was still more than a fortnight away, but she couldn’t summon any joy at the season. Fatigue weighed her down.

It had been two weeks since she’d visited Dr. Miller, so she made him her last stop for this day. Disembarking from the carriage, she once again encountered Sr. McElroy.

“My dearest Silvia. I’ve tried to visit you, but they keep saying you are not at home.”

He grabbed her hand, but she pulled it away. “They spoke the truth. I’ve been caring for the sick. The influenza has been a virulent illness in the village and surrounding area.”

The man’s eyes grew big and he backed away. “Marry me, and you’ll not need to dirty your hands with this kind of work.”

“Dirty my hands?...Oh,” she said dramatically. “You must be referring to the blood when I operated on the good doctor.”

He paled. “Blood?”

She nodded. “It was a gory surgery, but I successfully removed his appendix, and he is recovering well. I’m grateful I can help people who are hurting.”

He swallowed hard. “’Tis not proper for a lady to do this type of work.”

She straightened. “It is appropriate for this woman to do so, and any man who cannot understand and appreciate that about me is not one I could ever hope to marry.”

His countenance grew fierce as he scowled, and his eyes narrowed. “You need a strong hand and a few children to tame this wildness from you.”

“That hand would not be yours, Sir McElroy. I bid you good day.”

She turned to walk away, but he grabbed her arm to twist her around. He pulled her close and tried to kiss her.

She spat in his face and brought her heel down on his foot.

He yelped, pulled back, and looked at his boot. He raised a hand to strike her, but stopped when he saw a gun pointed at him.

"I've been assured that using my gun on anyone who physically accosts me would be justified. Considering you despise my chosen calling, I would not be obligated to provide medical care to you. So where would you prefer I put this bullet? There's a doctor two towns over who could extract it."

Hands up, he backed away. "You dare threaten me?"

"I believe it was you who threatened me, sir," she ground out as she backed toward the cottage door and knocked. She kept her weapon pointed at the baronet. When the door opened, she slipped inside and leaned against the wall with her eyes closed as she let the hand with the gun drop to her side. Her breath came in shudders.

"Miss?" the footman asked. "Are you well?"

Silvia shook her head. "Shaken, 'tis all. Grant me a moment."

Bruce walked into the hall and nodded to the servant indicating he should leave. The man did so. "Silvia?" Bruce came to stand before her. "What is the matter?"

"An erstwhile, albeit persistent suitor from Brighton followed me here to pressure me into accepting his hand."

"Is Sir Michael aware?"

"Yes."

He glanced at the gun in her hand. "Did you threaten to shoot him?" He gently removed the weapon from her fingers and set it on a table close by. Reaching up he untied her bonnet and lifted it off her head.

She set her bag on the floor and took off her cloak. "Yes."

"Could you have done that?"

"Maybe."

Bruce grinned and steered her toward the drawing room to sit by the fireplace. "I'll have some tea brought in." He departed the room and quickly returned.

Silvia took deep breaths to calm herself.

Bruce settled in a chair across from her. "I was beginning to fear you'd forgotten your old friend."

"Never that," Silvia whispered. "I've been afraid to come because I realize you've recovered enough to start taking care of some of your patients if you use a carriage and are careful. I guess I stayed away because..."

"Because what?"

"I'll be irrelevant, and I won't have an excuse to visit you."

“Let me get this straight. You didn’t come to see me because if I’ve recovered you wouldn’t be able to see me anymore?” His eyebrows rose as he shook his head and grinned.

“Something like that.”

“Makes no sense. It only means I can call on you as a man courting a woman, not as a man in need of a doctor.”

She frowned. “You want to court me?”

“I already asked you to be my wife, but you rejected my proposal. I assumed I needed to do some work to get you to agree.”

Silvia leapt to her feet and paced. “I would only harm your work here. I doubt I could stay home and be the comfortable wife you need.”

“Are you saying you want to assist me in my practice?”

She turned to him and stopped. “Yes—no—I don’t know what I want.”

The maid brought in the tea and set it on the table between the two chairs.

“Sit down and drink some tea and tell me what compelled you to draw your gun on the gentleman in front of my home.”

She accepted the cup he offered her and took a sip. Sighing, she explained her unwanted suitor.

“So that man is my competition?”

“Never that.”

“You won’t marry him, and you won’t wed me.”

“I never said I wouldn’t marry you. I couldn’t accept a proposal as you recovered and were medicating with brandy.”

“You thought perhaps I didn’t know my own mind in that moment?”

She set down the cup. “I should leave. You appear to have recovered well and I am glad God brought me here when you needed me most.”

He followed her as she strode to the door and put on her hat.

“Thank you for the tea,” she said.

He spun her to face him.

“My desires haven’t changed, Silvia. But I’ll give you time to know your own mind. I’ve waited long enough, but after this confinement, I’m impatient to get on with the business of living beyond my work as a profession. I don’t mind someone who can work alongside me. Who understands what I do. But I would never demand that you fill that role. I’d rather you were someone much dearer to my heart than that.” He touched her cheek gently sending shivers down her spine.

She grabbed her cloak and put it on. She peered out the window to find that Sir McElroy’s coach still waited. “Drat. The man is still

there. I'll need to take the back way home. Can you get a message to my groom to meet me at Hart Manor?"

"I'll send the footman out after you've made your escape. Have a care, my dear."

"Thank you, Doctor Miller. I am glad you are much better." She strode down through the kitchen to the back door and slipped through the garden into the woods.

Bruce watched out the back window until Silvia was out of sight. He couldn't stop grinning. Whether she realized it, she was the perfect wife for him. He headed back to the front of the house and grabbed his coat, deciding to talk to the groom himself. He walked over to the Tidley carriage. "Miss Burnett has chosen to walk home and asked me to tell you to meet her there."

The groom nodded and stepped up to his perch, and with a flick of his wrist the horses pulled the carriage away.

Bruce turned to head back to the house but was stopped by the tall aristocrat who stepped out of his coach.

"Do you live here?"

"Yes."

"Who are you?"

"Dr. Miller."

The man's eyes narrowed. "You're the one who has seduced my fiancée into believing she could work in medicine? What kind of fool does that?"

"Maybe one who realizes her gifts and wants her to be happy." Bruce almost wished he had brought the gun with him. *The gun!* Silvia left it on the table. He hoped she would be safe without it.

"And yet you keep her captive at your house? You sir, are no gentleman, and I should call you out for besmirching her honor in such an atrocious manner."

"You much mistake the matter, sir." Bruce turned to head back to the house, but the man grabbed him and punched him in the eye.

Bruce staggered under the blow, scowling at the man and taking a stance in case the baronet chose to fight more. The fleeting thought of his recent surgery came and went. He would defend himself as best he could.

"That'll teach you. I'm not leaving until you bring Miss Burnett to me. I suggest you do it speedily, lest I call the magistrate."

Bruce's left eye was already swelling shut from the force of the blow. "You can go tell the magistrate, Lord Remington, all about what happened here. He's a fair man. Rose Hill is a few miles from town down that road."

With a smug expression the man climbed back into his coach, and the driver urged the horses towards Rose Hill. Bruce shook his head and went back inside to treat his eye. Maybe he should have hit the swell back, but he was a healer. The thought of Silvia holding a gun on the man brought a smile to his face. The baronet had no idea what a treasure Miss Burnett truly was. To discount her compassion and gift for the healing arts was to fail to understand her completely.

Sinking into his chair by the fire, he picked up his cup of tepid tea. He obviously was faring no better in wooing the beautiful doctor's daughter, than was the man outside. In the end she'd run away from both of them. He sighed.

An hour later Lord Remington was sitting across from him.

"Sir McElroy did that to you?"

"Yes. In front of my home with no provocation."

"He said you were keeping Miss Burnett from going home."

"She escaped out the back rather than facing him again. Nothing improper happened. Your servants are still in residence and can testify to the fact. She didn't even check my wound."

"I'll need to go meet with her, but it's getting late. I'll take care of that on Monday as tomorrow is the Sabbath. She has done an admirable job in caring for patients once they realized the gravity of the illness."

Bruce grinned. "I possessed no doubts she would."

"Will you be resuming your duties soon?"

"I can start to get about for a few hours a day if I have a coach in which to travel. I cannot yet ride a horse."

"I will loan you a coach."

"No. You've already done so much."

"What are friends for? I'll see you in church in the morning?"

"I plan to make an appearance."

Marcus grinned. "Black eye and all. Now won't that get the tongues wagging."

"Let them talk. As long as they understand the treasure that Silvia is, I won't care."

"Rest well, friend." Marcus grabbed his coat and hat and was soon on his way back to Rose Hill.

Exhaustion overtook Bruce. He requested dinner be brought to his room and trudged back up the stairs to rest. He really wanted to be in church tomorrow, especially so he could see the lovely Silvia Burnett.

~*~

The next morning Bruce walked to the church for the first time in weeks, and found his usual spot.

Sir Tidley spied him and came to welcome him. "You're back. I didn't expect the black eye. What happened?"

Bruce grinned. "This was apparently an early, and unasked-for Christmas gift from the man stalking Miss Burnett."

Michael's smile disappeared. "McElroy did that to you?"

"Yes."

"I'm terribly sorry. The man has been a nuisance since he arrived in town."

"I agree."

Sir Tidley went back to sit with his wife, children, and Silvia.

When Silvia glanced his way, her mouth dropped open. When her gaze met his, her face grew pink. She quickly turned away and stared at the prayer book in her lap.

After the service ended, Bruce sat as others milled about. Soon person after person was coming to him to talk about their ailments.

"Please understand." He put a hand up to stop the clamor. "I'm not yet fully recovered."

"Miss Burnett told us you could get about by carriage now," one lady scolded.

"True, but I do not own a carriage." They didn't need to know that Marcus had extended an offer.

Sir Tidley came from the bench behind him and whispered in his ear. "I could loan you mine, under one condition."

Bruce turned, "Which is?"

Michael whispered in his ear again, "You join us for luncheon. Come home with us, and I can free you from this mob."

Bruce nodded. "Excuse me, everyone." He stood and gingerly made his way to the aisle where Michael made a dramatic act of assisting him out of the church.

"I'm not that weak, Michael," the doctor chided.

"Shhhh. They don't realize that."

Bruce shook hands with the minister and walked alongside Michael to the waiting carriage. He pulled himself up and grimaced as pain tugged at his side. Almost falling into the carriage, he was saved by the strong arms of Silvia catching and righting him. "Thank you," he mouthed to her. "For saving me."

She frowned as he sat next to her on the rear facing bench as Michael climbed in to sit next to his wife.

"That was weeks ago. You needn't keep thanking me."

Their gazes met, and he grinned. She wasn't calling him out on his weakness. Maybe it was too soon to be getting in and out of a carriage.

Exiting the carriage was a much easier affair, and he lent a hand to Miss Burnett as she stepped down. He hooked her arm around his, and she rested her hand on his forearm. They walked side by side to the steps of Hart Manor. He grimaced at realizing she'd done so to hide the need for him to rely subtly on her support. The woman truly was a wonder.

Michael detached him from his escort to let the women go refresh themselves and brought him into the drawing room to sit in front of the fire. Then Michael thrust a glass of brandy into his hand. "So, you want to explain yourself?"

"What? What did I do wrong?"

The women entered the room. Once they were seated, Silvia leaned forward.

“How did you get that black eye?”

“Your supposed *fiancé* accused me of hiding you from him. After he hit me, he sat outside the house for nearly an hour waiting for you to emerge before lodging a complaint with Lord Remington.”

Silvia frowned. “That would explain things.”

“What things?”

“Such as why no one would talk to me this morning.”

Katrina’s mouth dropped open. “You don’t suppose he spread some kind of tale...?”

“It is exactly what he would do. I’m so sorry, Bruce.”

He was confused. “What kind of tale do you think he spread?”

Michael raised his eyebrows. “Really, Bruce? Did she remove more than your appendix?”

Then it hit him. The entire village believe he had compromised her. “Oh, no! But wait, people were coming to me in droves...”

“Only as a last resort. They are skeptical that I can help them, but desperation gives them no other option,” Silvia responded dryly. She stood and walked to the door.

“Where are you going?” Katrina asked.

“Back to my job. The one I moved here for.”

Katrina rushed to her side. “You may take the afternoon off at least and enjoy a meal with us before you go licking your wounds.”

Michael paced. “So, in spite of all of Lord Remington’s precautions in providing extra servants to provide chaperonage for when Silvia came to care for you, we are now at an impasse.”

“Not true. I could always leave,” Silvia said.

“And go where?” Katrina asked. “No money, no connections, and your reputation in tatters because of a jealous buffoon?”

“I suppose that was his goal. Make it impossible to say no to his proposal.” Silvia slumped into a nearby chair, leaned forward, and put her head in her hands. “It’s hopeless.”

Katrina knelt before her. “Nothing is hopeless. I suggest we pray about this, eat dinner, and then you get some rest. We have time to consider our options and you are always welcome here, regardless of the tittle-tattle in town. They will soon see the error of their ways.”

Bruce’s heart ached. He’d put Silvia beyond the pale. Whether Sir McElroy was right or not was irrelevant. He compromised her the minute he asked her to operate on him even though Marcus was present. Well, except for that kiss. He stood. “She could always marry me.”

Everyone stopped to stare at him.

“You’re a nodcock, Doctor, if you think that constitutes a

proposal,” Michael stated.

Silvia shook her head. “You owe me nothing, Bruce. This isn’t your problem to solve. It’s mine.”

“No.” Michael protested. “It’s God’s.” He motioned for them to all to come close and bent his head to pray. “Heavenly Father, we come to You with Silvia’s reputation and ask that by Your miraculous power You would show us what we are to do. Comfort Silvia and give us each wisdom in the coming days and weeks so that our words and actions would honor You.”

Montague entered the room “Luncheon is served.”

They went to eat. Bruce considered Silvia as she moved food around her plate. “You need to eat and keep up your own health. Don’t let me be summoned to your side to nurse you back to health.”

She gave him a small smile and took a bite of food. “I am tired. Please excuse me.” She placed her napkin on the table and rose to her feet. Head held high she left the room.

Bruce sighed. “She wouldn’t really go to McElroy and accept his proposal would she?”

“For her sake, and yours, I hope not,” Katrina said.

~*~

Several days passed. Silvia spent her days with the children and her nights wondering and praying. By Wednesday, she was exhausted. When Bruce strode into the nursery there was no escape.

“Silvia, may we go somewhere private to talk?”

“Do Michael and Katrina realize you are here?”

“Yes. Come.” He held out a hand and together they took the stairs to the library. He shut the door behind him and locked it.

“Why are you...?”

“Several reasons. McElroy is still in town and it would not surprise me if he tried to push his way in here. And I don’t want you to run away from me.”

“Is there a reason I would want to?”

“Come, sit down here next to me so we can talk.” His hand went to his side.

“You still experience some pain.”

“Some. ’Tis minor. Stairs, getting in a carriage, all make it more painful if I am not careful.”

Oh, he had taken the stairs to the third floor to fetch her! “You could have sent a servant to get me.”

“And be told you were unavailable like every other time?”

Silvia hung her head. “I’ve not been in the mood for visitors.”

Bruce reached for her hand with a tender touch. “I’ve botched this twice now, and I hope I can do this right. I’ve loved you since we sat on that beach in Brighton making youthful promises. I never

believed I was good enough for a woman like you, in spite of my education. Your father forbade me proposing until I was settled and you were older.”

She allowed his hand to fully envelope hers and warmth spread through her.

“When I got your letter, it was as if my heart had been in hibernation all these years and spring had finally come. You arrived and your beauty stole my breath.”

“I figured it was because I was wielding a knife,” she joked.

“I trusted you. I was a fool not to return for you. I never thought you’d be content with a humble village doctor, and the people here have become like family. I care about them.”

“The feeling is mutual, I think. They place great faith in you. Your absence was keenly felt.”

He sighed. “I love you. I could think of no better woman to be my wife and helper in serving this community.”

“They all believe me to be an immoral woman.”

“They’ve been misled, but they will change their minds. Those you have cared for are standing by you and denouncing Sir McElroy’s lies.”

“Oh.”

Bruce nodded and took her other hand to hold them both. “I love you and long to spend the rest of my life with you. Loving, raising a family, and working together.”

“I sometimes think I would be a terrible mother.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ve enjoyed doing the work of medicine so much. I’d hate to give it up.”

His brows wrinkled. “Why would you need to give it up?”

“You are well. I am no longer needed.”

“You are needed, by me and the people in the village. You blessed them and I need someone with whom I can discuss treatments. I can think of no better assistant.”

“So, you don’t want a wife, you want an assistant?” She kept a straight face. He really was trying so hard.

“Did your father know about the promise we’d made?”

She shook her head. “And as much as I hoped you remembered and would want to fulfill that promise, I don’t want you to marry me because you believe you need to or to salve my reputation with this nonsense.”

“No one is forcing my hand. When can we wed?”

“It takes three weeks to call the banns.”

“We could marry on Christmas Day. I should be fully recovered by then.”

She smiled. "I would like that very much."

"May I kiss you?" he asked.

"I was hoping you would."

He obliged her.

~*~

Sir McElroy called every day that week, but Michael denied him access to Silvia who stayed in the nursery with the children.

Tired of hiding away in her room, Silvia wandered to the library to get a book to read. Something to take her mind off of everything that had happened. Perhaps she'd choose an academic tome. She definitely didn't want one of Mrs. Radcliffe's gothic novels. She was surprised to come upon Sir Tidley with none other than Sir McElroy.

Michael was in a chair. "What brings you here, Sir McElroy?"

"I must see my fiancée, so we can plan our wedding."

Silvia gasped from the open door at the words. Both men turned and she fought the urge to run.

"Have the banns been called?"

The man shook his head. "I procured a special license."

"Really? Whyever for? Did you compromise her? Is there a necessity to rush to the altar?" Michael inquired.

Her momentary paralysis at the doorway was over. Rage infused her as she rushed forward. "This is preposterous! Of course, he has done no such thing. And I have no desire to wed this man!"

The visitor blustered, "No... Um."

Michael raised a hand to forestall further speech.

"Women can be difficult to understand but Miss Burnett has been especially clear that she has no desire to marry you."

The man puffed out his chest.

"Let me ask you this. Did you tell people that Dr. Miller compromised Miss Burnett to force her to accept your proposal?"

The baronet paled. "I only shared what I saw."

"While drinking at the local pub."

"How did you...?"

"I live in this area and used to work as a spy for the War Office. I've done some checking and discovered some shady events in your past that society would scorn you for."

"Are you threatening me?"

"I'm stating facts."

The man leapt to his feet. "I could call you out for this."

Michael rose. "For what?"

"Questioning my honor."

"What honor?" Michael ground his teeth. "I am done with these games. I will marry Silvia or else."

"I'd rather be dead than marry you!" Silvia asserted, but she hung

close to the door in case she needed to seek the safety of her room. She trusted Sir Tidley, but McElroy was volatile.

“Or else what?” Michael challenged.

Sir McElroy pulled out a gun. “This.” He waved it in Michael’s direction.

Seriously? Silvia held her breath afraid to do anything that could cause the intruder to harm her friend’s husband.

Michael opened a drawer and pulled out his own weapon and primed it. “Are we going to stand and shoot each other or count paces?”

The man pulled the trigger and missed Michael, but the former spy hadn’t waited for that and shot the baronet in the thigh. The man fell to the ground screaming in agony.

Silvia’s breath came in shuddering gasps. She’d assisted in caring for bullet wounds before but had never seen someone shot.

The wounded man writhed on the carpet whimpering and moaning in his pain.

Michael went to the door of the study and summoned the footman. “I need help to get Sir McElroy back to his room at the inn. Someone can take a carriage and fetch Dr. Miller. Miss Burnett, I believe we have need of your services.”

Katrina rushed to him. “I heard gunshots. Are you well?”

Silvia sank into a chair. She’d need to treat this man?

“He missed. I’m fine. He, however, is not.”

As if on cue, Sir McElroy groaned.

Two footmen carried the baronet to the coach. Michael followed stopped and placed a hand on Silvia’s shoulder. “Gather your things and I’ll send you in the other carriage to fetch Dr. Miller. I suspect he’ll need to remove that bullet.” He strode out the door.

Katrina turned to Silvia. “Come. There is work to be done.”

Rising to her feet she allowed her friend to lead her to her room. *Thank you, Lord for sparing Michael’s life. Help me deal with caring for a man I detest. You call me to forgive but he almost killed an honorable man...all over me?* Grabbing her bag, she headed back downstairs, and Montague helped her with her cloak. Exiting the house Michael assisted her into the carriage and they departed.

Bruce was startled to find Silvia on his doorstep. She rushed past him with her black bag. "Come Bruce, we must hurry to the inn."

He followed behind. "Why?"

"Because Michael shot Sir McElroy. You need to remove the bullet."

"I'll get the chloroform."

"Why? You didn't need it."

Bruce packed it anyway. This intriguing woman possessed a dark side, did she? He grinned. Soon they were back in the carriage and barreling to the inn.

"How is your side?" Silvia asked.

"Tender at times but getting better every day. I'm trying to take it easy."

"This venture may not qualify for that."

"Where did the man get shot?"

"I believe it was his leg."

Bruce's eyes grew wide. "That might mean I need to remove his trousers."

Silvia blushed. "Such is the reason I rushed to fetch you instead of tending to the wound myself."

Snow began to fall outside the carriage window. Christmas was coming and he had the best gift right here beside him.

The carriage pulled to a stop. Bruce stepped down and turned to help Silvia. Together they entered the inn and were ushered up the stairs to the room where their patient writhed in agony.

A young man, supposedly Sir McElroy's valet, greeted them. "He's insensible."

"Fetch us some hot water."

The man left, and Bruce approached the bed with Silvia behind him. "Sir. I'm Doctor Miller. Where are you wounded?"

"My leg." The man opened his eyes. "You!"

"Yes, I am the doctor."

"You cannot touch me." He spied Silvia next to him. "What is she doing here?"

Silvia set her bag on a nearby table and opened it. "What you would you like first, Doctor?"

"Miss Burnett is my affianced bride. She needs to leave," Sir McElroy groaned as Dr. Miller inspected the wound.

"Not a through and through but it is in deep. Knife and tweezers. Some alcohol to cleanse the wound. I can cut away a small portion of the trousers for the sake of modesty."

Silvia turned around with the instruments and a bottle of

whiskey. "Anything for him?"

The patient writhed. "You're not listening to me! Get her out of here! I don't want either of you touching me."

"Well. Guess that means we can go downstairs and partake of dinner. Sir Tidley awaits us, and Lord Remington has been summoned as the local magistrate." Dr. Miller turned to the patient. "Lead poisoning can be a nasty way to go if your leg doesn't get infected and need to be amputated. It's high up on the thigh. Why didn't he aim for the heart? Tidley is a crack shot."

"Perhaps he thought it generous to spare Sir McElroy's life. The baronet has been delusional, believing that I would marry him." Silvia put the instruments back in the bag.

"Ah, yes, and spread lies about you as well. Let's go, my dear. Our services are not needed, and he has a right to refuse care. Who are we to argue the matter with him?"

They turned to leave, Dr. Miller putting his hand on the small of Silvia's back.

"Leave my future wife alone!" yelled the baronet.

Silvia turned. "I'm not your fiancée!"

"But..."

"Good day, Sir McElroy." They left the room and wandered down the stairs. Sir Tidley procured a private parlour for them to dine in.

"Surgery done already?" Michael asked.

"No. He refused our care."

"The man is more daft than I realized." Michael pulled out a chair, so Silvia could sit. Food was brought in, and soon Lord Remington was there.

"I hear there's been a contretemps at Hart Manor."

Michael described what happened and Marcus left to interview the patient.

"Thank you for protecting me, Michael. I never suspected he'd seek to endanger your life."

"He's all hot air and bluster. Still and all, I have a hole to repair in my wall. He was in high dudgeon when he entered, so I wasn't taken off-guard."

They partook of the meal and Marcus returned. "I need to send him to London, I think. Will he survive the journey without having that bullet removed?"

Bruce patted his lips with the napkin and then set it down. "Hard to say. Not sure how much blood he's lost or if the bullet has hit anything major."

Silvia's eyes grew wide. "I forgot that there are some significant arteries in that area."

"I don't think he got hit there or he'd have bled out already, but it

could make extraction difficult and painful.”

Marcus sat to eat with them. “I’m not sure what to do with him. Seems like prison would be anticlimactic after all this. Do you want to let it go and send him back to his home in Brighton?”

“His chances of surviving that trip are about as good as Newgate. Either way, he would have little choice for medical doctors.”

Marcus frowned. “I suppose I could give him a choice between the prosecution and returning home. He cannot remain here.”

“I didn’t think he was so flush in the pockets to afford staying here as long as he has. I don’t have any significant inheritance to make me worth all this trouble.”

Bruce squeezed her hand. “You’re worth it all and more.”

“I’ll give him his options. He’d need to leave in the morning.” Marcus rose to go talk to the injured man upstairs.

“We’d best be getting you both home,” Michael said. “Katrina will be worried.”

“Thank you for providing dinner,” Bruce murmured as he rose and assisted Silvia to her feet. “I’m sorry we didn’t get our first opportunity to work together side by side.”

She smiled. “I’m sure it will happen soon enough. I’m relieved we didn’t need to perform the operation.”

Michael steered them through the public room to the carriage awaiting outside. He climbed in last. “I feel decidedly *de trop*. When will the two of you decide you were meant to be with each other? If I weren’t so loathe to brave the cold, I’d be up with the groom.”

Bruce gave Silvia secret grin. Michael would find out soon enough. Bruce was dropped off first. He stepped down from the coach and went to his home. Soon he’d have a wife to share it with. The thought filled him with deep contentment. He climbed the stairs to go to bed and said a prayer for the unfortunate Sir McElroy. He couldn’t blame the man for desiring Silvia. He was grateful she’d chosen him.

~*~

On Saturday morning, Michael perused a missive it and then passed it to Silvia at the breakfast table.

“Sir McElroy has departed. Dare we hope this is the last we’ve seen of him?”

“I feel bad that he is traveling with that wound,” Michael said.

“I suspect he’ll be a difficult patient. I pity his servants.” Silvia shook her head.

~*~

Two weeks passed with Bruce making regular visits to Hart Manor to spend time with his beloved and share meals with Michael and Katrina.

But he hadn’t been able to stop by today. Bruce was exhausted.

He had returned from checking on patients and was about to relax with a cup of tea by the fire. when someone knocked on his door. He no longer had the extra servants and he found he missed them. Perhaps he should hire another after he wed, as he wanted Silvia to be able to help him with his practice if she desired.

He rose to his feet to answer the door, surprised to find a young woman there. A very pregnant young woman whom he'd never before seen. She threw herself into his arms, "Oh, Bruce, how I've missed you! We haven't spoken for some time, but I needed to come now that the baby is almost here." She pushed him back inside the house and closed the door. "Aren't you going to invite me in?"

He was puzzled. "I'm sorry if I offend, but we are not acquainted. You need to leave." He grabbed for the doorknob.

"You'd throw the mother of your child out into the cold?"

"I don't have any children." He shoved her out the door and locked it behind her. She pounded and screamed, and he went to the rear of the house to make sure that door was locked as well. What was going on? Who was this woman? She was obviously with child, but why did she think it was his? He'd chosen to follow God from a young age and to never allow himself intimacy meant for marriage. He sighed.

He only hoped the woman would leave town.

~*~

Silvia was roused at three in the morning by a maid. "Miss, there be somewhat urgent 'appening. They need a midwife at the inn in Didcot."

"They didn't contact Dr. Miller?"

"Says he refused to come."

"That doesn't sound right." Silvia dragged herself out of bed and threw on her plainest gown. "I hate to ask, but can you get either Lady or Sir Tidley?"

"Yes, miss."

Michael met her in the hallway. "What's amiss?"

"I don't know. I've been summoned to be a midwife at the inn. For some reason Dr. Miller refused to go."

"That doesn't sound like him. Give me a few minutes, and I'll accompany you. I don't want you out alone and unprotected."

She grabbed her bag and went downstairs to make a stop into the kitchen to get a glass of water. Perhaps there was something to eat left over from yesterday. She found a roll and ate that. Birthing a baby could take hours. What kind of woman would be giving birth in an inn? It was close to Christmas. Well, the inn was better than the stables that Jesus had been born in.

Soon the carriage was ready. Michael assisted Silvia inside and

they began their journey. "We'll stop at Bruce's first."

Silvia nodded. She hoped Bruce was well. He would never turn away a patient now that he'd recovered from his surgery.

Michael alighted from the carriage and strode to the quiet house. Silvia waited and watched. Soon Bruce appeared at the door and words were exchanged. The door closed and Michael returned. Settling in the seat across from her, his brows were knit together as he yawned.

"Bruce was never asked to come. He's dressing and will be with us shortly."

"They never came to him? How odd."

Michael nodded.

~*~

Bruce dressed in a hurry. A baby? Fear tingled up his spine. Was this the same woman who had arrived on his doorstep? He sucked in a breath, drank some water and grabbing his coat, hat, and bag, was soon out the door and into the carriage.

Silvia gave him a soft smile. If Michael hadn't been sitting across from him he'd have leaned over to steal a kiss. Her hair was pulled back into a braid. He never realized how long it was. This would be their first time being able to work together as a doctor and midwife. He reached over and squeezed her hand as the carriage took off for the Inn.

Soon they were there and after helping Silvia from the carriage they went into the common area of the Inn. Mr. Hammon greeted them with blurry eyes. "She be up the stairs first door on the left. Try to keep her from waking the other guests."

Mrs. Hammon peered out from the kitchen. "I'll be sending up some tea and rags for you. I've tried to keep her comfortable, but the poor girl is miserable."

"Is anyone with her now?"

"Nay, I just left her. Go on up. Sir Tidley, would you care to wait down here? I'll make you some tea and I have a few scones from yesterday."

"Tea for now would be fine after you've seen to their needs."

Silvia and Bruce started up the stairs.

"What is the woman's name?" Michael asked.

"Said she was Mrs. Bruce Miller," the landlord stated.

Silvia glanced at Bruce.

"Miller is a common enough name but let me assure you; as a believer, I've never been with a woman."

She stopped him on the stairs. "You've gone to London to train at times, have you not?"

He nodded.

"And you never...?"

"Never."

Silvia's eyes narrowed. She turned and continued up the steps.

Bruce didn't know whether she believed him.

They both entered the room, and the woman writhing on the bed stopped to stare at them. "Who are you?"

"I'm Miss Burnett. They called me in as a midwife. This here is Dr. Miller."

The woman pointed to Silvia. "You can stay. He needs to leave."

It was the woman who had been to his house yesterday. "Either we both stay or we both go."

A contraction hit the woman, and she moaned in pain. Bruce put a hand on Silvia's arm to hold her back. She frowned.

When the contraction passed, Bruce came close to peer down at the woman and repeated his offer. "Either we both stay or we both go. Your choice."

Silvia was by his side. "I've delivered babies alone before. You can go sit with Michael, and I'll send for you if I need you."

He turned to Silvia. He dragged her to the door and into the hallway. "I don't trust her. She showed up at my house last night after rounds trying to tell me that this was my baby. I never..." He sighed.

"Why would she say such a thing?"

"I don't know. I'd never seen her before yesterday."

Silvia frowned. "We'll figure this out, but first, she needs help delivering this child."

He nodded. "Send for me if you need me. Yell out the door. I'll be down the stairs."

She kissed his cheek. "I do love you, you know that, right?"

"And I you. Thank you, Silvia."

She turned and went into the room as the woman started to moan louder.

The door shut in his face and he headed on down the stairs.

~*~

Silvia went to work. The young woman spouted all kinds of nonsense in between contractions, telling stories about Bruce. Every tale was a stab to Silvia's heart. Could a woman be lying like this while giving birth? As much as she wanted to fall apart and mourn the man she thought she knew, she had a baby to deliver. There would be time to deal with all the other information later. She shoved it all into a closet in her mind and locked the door.

"I can see his head. With the next contraction push hard."

The umbilical cord had wrapped around the baby's neck, and Silvia tried to loosen it the minute she realized what occurred. As the next contraction hit, the cord tightened around Silvia's finger as she

attempted to loosen it. At the same time, the woman screamed cursing someone named Gerald. Silvia barely heard her as she struggled with the baby, realizing it was too late. The child wasn't breathing.

She wiped off the child and tried to revive it. She placed it on the bed and ran to the door. Opening it, she yelled, "Bruce! I need you!" She ran back to the baby and tried to blow air into its lungs.

The woman on the bed was crying. "Where's my baby?"

"I'm still taking care of it," Silvia said.

Bruce burst into the room.

"Get him out of here!" the woman screamed.

He rushed over to Silvia and she whispered about what had happened. Bruce checked over the baby. He worked on the baby and soon the child cried. He cut the cord, wrapped the little one up and handed it to Silvia. A Christmas miracle.

Silvia accepted the tiny body into her arms. She walked to the head of the bed. "Your little boy almost didn't survive." She handed the baby to the woman who stared at the tiny face. "Who is Gerald?" Silvia asked.

The woman cooed as she held her infant child.

Bruce worked at cleaning up the afterbirth as Silvia stood to the side silently weeping. He wasn't positive why, unless it was the stress of almost losing a patient. That was never easy.

Silvia removed her bloodied apron and washed her hands, scrubbing them with soap. Without another word, she left the room. She had asked about a man named Gerald, but the woman hadn't answered.

Bruce went to wash his hands. Silvia had been efficient in her preparations which made his job easier. His esteem for her grew. He dried his hands and turned to the woman in the bed who was sniffing now.

"Who are you?" he asked.

The woman refused to answer.

He walked out of the room to find his fiancée.

~*~

Silvia sat in a chair by the fire in the private room Michael had arranged. Food had been brought in, but she wasn't hungry. Numb would describe her best. All the words screamed in that room upstairs had been locked in the closet of her mind and now she opened it up enough to shove in the grief. Uncertainty of who Bruce might be to this woman, came along with almost failing to deliver a healthy baby.

"Come on, Silvia. It's already past noon and you've not had a bite to eat all day," Michael pleaded with her. She hadn't told him anything about the birth or the woman and her insinuations. She couldn't talk about what happened.

"I want to go home."

"I'll call for the carriage. Will Bruce be joining us?"

She shrugged.

The door closed as Michael left the room and the only sounds were the crackling of the fire as it licked the logs, and the breaking of her heart.

The door opened again. She didn't even check to see who it was but stood to put on her coat.

"Silvia?"

Bruce. She turned to him.

He moved toward her and she shook her head.

Michael entered. "The carriage is ready."

Silvia followed him out. Her black bag was left upstairs, but she didn't care about that right now.

"Silvia?" Bruce clasped her arm as she walked by.

"I can't...release me, Dr. Miller." He let her go and she strode past

him, closing the door behind her. Her heart shattered into a million pieces.

~*~

Bruce stood there nonplussed. He'd spent hours in this room while Silvia had taken care of the woman upstairs. He still had a patient, so he couldn't leave yet. Perhaps Silvia needed time to rest and recover. He'd be trying to sleep when he got back. The innkeeper came in.

"You're still here, Dr. Miller?"

"Yes."

"The baby?"

"A boy."

"Congratulations." The man started to clean up the table.

"Pardon?"

"It was your child. The woman told me so. How you could be marrying Miss Burnett and not the one who bore your child is none of my concern, but I thought you to be an honorable man."

"Mr. Hammon, I'd never met that woman until yesterday. The child couldn't be mine. I'm not that kind of man."

"All young men are, 'ceptin' maybe the viscount."

"Mr. Hammon, where did I go this year? When did I leave this village?"

The man stopped to think and shrugged.

"Nine months ago, didn't I come here to treat your gout? And eight months ago, I set your son's broken leg from playing around in the barn. Tell me when I would have left the village to seduce any woman?"

Mr. Hammon stared at him wide-eyed. "She's a liar."

"I've worked in this village for years. Worshipped alongside you all every Sunday. Come to help people regardless of the weather or time of day. How could you believe I would callously abandon a woman who was carrying my child, much less have intimate relations with one outside of marriage?"

"But you and Miss Burnett...?"

"Are due to be married in a week and we have never been alone for longer than a minute. Even during my operation, someone else was in the room."

The man nodded. "I'm sorry I believed her lies or the rumors that Sir Gerald told as well. Nasty business, that."

"Sir Gerald?"

"Yes. Sir Gerald McElroy. That's how he signed it when he arrived."

"My guess is that the woman upstairs was hired by the baronet."

"Hired?"

“Use your imagination, man. Either to stir up trouble or possibly even left that poor woman in this position. Maybe he paid her to come and besmirsch my reputation.”

“How soon can I kick her out?”

“I’d give her a day to rest and she can be on her way. I’d better go up there and gather my things.”

“I’m sorry I thought poorly of you, Dr. Miller.”

“Apology accepted. Can you make sure the rest of the village hears the truth?”

The man smiled. “Aye. I can do that.”

Bruce trudged up the stairs. He knocked but there was no answer in the room. He slowly opened the door and found the bed empty, except for the swaddled infant there. “Miss?” No answer. The woman was gone. He went to put his things away and gathered up Silvia’s stuff as well. He collected the infant. Poor thing was abandoned like the bloodied and dirty rags. He swallowed hard. As sad as it was for the babe to be orphaned, it would have likely had a hard life given the choices of his parents. But what to do with him?

He left with the child and took the long walk home in the bitter cold. Once there he found a box to put the child in and took it over to a young family that had recently had a child. Perhaps they’d not mind another baby to care for.

~*~

Silvia spoke not a word when she returned home. She went straight to her room, locked the door, closed the shades, and undressed. She stirred a fire to life and climbed under her covers and slept.

When she awoke it was dark. She rose to open the drapes. The sun shone bright over newly fallen snow. The brightness and purity of the blanket of white so starkly contrasted with the bleakness of her soul. The memories of the previous day flooded in and she sank to a chair. Cold seeped in through her toes so she roused herself enough to get the fire to a blaze. Her losses crept up on her.

Her father.

Her home.

Bruce.

She thought her fiancé was an honorable man. Where had the compassionate doctor she’d once loved, gone? She rose to do her ablutions and dress. Her hair was a mess so she unbraided it and brushed it out. Staring at herself in the mirror she was shocked at how pale she was. Dark shadows underlined her bloodshot eyes. Had she wept during the night? She couldn’t remember. She twisted her hair up into a bun and secured it. Her black gown reflected her heart. What day was it?

Sunday.

The second Sunday for the banns to be called. She'd talk to Michael and Katrina about cancelling the wedding. Perhaps she'd seek employment as a governess. She couldn't stay here. Never had she found the prospect of Christmas so depressing. First losing her father and now Bruce.

She descended the stairs and found the breakfast parlour empty. She wandered to the kitchen, inadvertently surprising the cook who was humming a Christmas hymn.

"Oh, miss! If you'da rang a maid would have brought you something."

"May I have some tea? I'm not terribly hungry."

"Sit yourself down here, and I'll take care of you." The kindly cook bustled about.

Soon a hot cup of tea was in front of her with fresh baked bread and jam. Silvia's stomach rumbled, and she polished off two slices of bread and jam and two cups of tea.

"Thank you, Mrs. Thomas."

"You are welcome. It is always a pleasure to serve you." The cook removed the dishes and continued to bustle about the kitchen. "Get on with you, now. I's work to do."

Silvia stood and went in search of her host or hostess. She found them both in the drawing room. She stood in the doorway for a moment before they noticed her.

Michael leapt to his feet. "Silvia. Come in. I hope you are well-rested after your ordeal yesterday."

Katrina pulled her to sit next to her on the settee. "What's wrong, Silvia?"

"I need to find employment somewhere."

"Why? Why would you leave? You're to be married next week."

Silvia shook her head. "I don't think I can do that."

Michael frowned. "Why not?"

"The young woman...said the baby was Bruce's."

"Poppycock," Michael protested. "When would he have gone anywhere? He didn't know her. She approached him at his home the day before spouting such nonsense, but he'd never seen her before."

"A woman in labor doesn't lie, does she?"

Katrina patted her hand. "She would if she were paid enough."

"Who would pay a pregnant woman to lie?"

"Mr. *Gerald* McElroy perhaps?"

"She cursed him at the end. She only said Gerald."

"See?"

"After hours of painful labor and telling me all about Dr. Miller."

"She disappeared. Abandoned the baby. Bruce made sure the

baby had a good home. Poor thing.” Michael sighed. “Bruce hasn’t left the village for well over a year. He’s not courted any women hereabouts and has been too busy doctoring to attend dances. He’s been faithful, Silvia, to God and to you.”

“I almost lost the baby.”

Katrina wrapped her arms around her. “Sometimes things like that happen. You can’t always save everyone. But with Bruce’s help, you did. And the child has a chance to live a better life.”

“As an orphan?” That was what she was herself. Her heart ached for the discarded child.

“He’ll be cared for by a family in the village. They welcomed the child without reservation. A Christmas blessing was how they referred to him. Named him Nicolas. He will be fine.”

“Maybe so.” She rose and walked to the door. “I’ll be in my room. I do not want to be disturbed.”

“But...” Michael started but, she’d shut the door behind her.

In her room she locked the doors and closed the drapes. The fire was the only light. She stared at the flame before grabbing her Bible. It fell open to Ecclesiastes, chapter three and she started to read.

To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven. What was her purpose? She’d longed for it to be working in medicine, but yesterday she’d almost failed. If Bruce hadn’t arrived, the baby would have died.

A time to be born, and a time to die. Was it that baby’s time to be born? For what purpose? To show her to be a fraud? For trusting in the wrong things? The wrong man? Her own abilities?

A time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up. She’d come here to grieve the loss of her father and move on to a new life. She’d experienced healing in accomplishing her work and in knowing Bruce’s love, but now? It was as if it had all been torn asunder. Was there any hope of it being restored?

A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance. When had she ever danced? She hoped for a time of laughter and joy with her marriage to Bruce, but now it seemed those dreams were as ashes in the fireplace.

A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together. Cast away? Certainly, an apt description of how lost she felt. That little boy had been cast away as well but had been gathered into a new family.

A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing. Her time for either had passed. Was Bruce really innocent? Hours of hearing his character torn apart was difficult to erase from her memory. Was that woman really that good of an actress or were those words true?

A time to get, and a time to lose. She thought maybe she’d gain a

husband, a family, and her own opportunity to serve and in one morning it was dross.

A time to keep, and a time to cast away. Could she keep Bruce? Would he even want her after her failure? If the woman truly lied was Silvia casting him away for naught?

A time to mend, and a time to sew. She didn't know if her heart could be stitched back together as she had done to Bruce's wound.

A time to keep silence, and a time to speak. There were no words to speak right now. Silence was her only solace. Christmas carols about peace and joy failed to bring comfort.

A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace. Love and peace seemed unreachable. Did Sir McElroy despise her so much that he'd spend money to destroy her one hope of happiness?

No answers and only questions. She set aside her Bible and climbed back into bed, fully dressed, and cried herself to sleep.

Bruce finally saddled his mare to ride to Hart Manor. He'd slept away an entire day. His side ached as he pulled himself onto the horse's back, but once he was moving, he felt better. He had Silvia's black bag with him. He'd heard nothing from Michael or her since that morning, and the wedding was only days away. Soon. Soon he'd be waking up to her by his side. He could hardly wait.

Montague opened the door and bade him entrance. He was shown into Michael's study.

"The study, Michael? Not the drawing room? Have I transgressed somehow?"

"Tis more private here." Michael rose and locked the door. "Come. Sit. Would you like some brandy?"

"Twould be welcome. Winter has come. The snow makes everything appear fresh and clean."

He accepted the glass, and Michael sat across from him, no smile on his face.

"What's amiss? Is Katrina well?"

Michael startled. "Katrina? She's in good health as are the children."

"What's wrong?"

"Silvia hasn't been the same since returning from the birthing."

"How so?"

"Sleeping a lot. Locked in her room. What little she's spoken indicates she wants to leave. Cancel the wedding."

Bruce slumped in his seat and sipped some of the brandy. The warm burn reminded him he was still alive. He swallowed hard and set down the glass. "She'd leave me?"

Michael nodded. "She hasn't left yet, but I'm concerned for her. She seemed a serious person from the moment I met her, but determined. It's as if she believes she has nothing for which to live."

"May I see her?"

"The woman was lying, wasn't she? I didn't defend you for nothing."

"Of course, she was. I never had the inclination to seek pleasures outside of marriage. I buried myself in my work instead. When I got that letter from Silvia, old hopes rekindled, and I suddenly longed for everything you and Marcus and your friends share."

"Which is?"

"Love. A family."

Michael smiled. "I never dared dream I would experience this depth of contentment. It was worth fighting for."

"And now I must fight for mine."

Michael nodded. "It would seem so."

"May I see her?"

"She'll refuse you."

"Sounds as though she's sick and needs a physician."

"I agree."

Michael retrieved the master key and walked with Bruce to Silvia's bedroom. "You realize if I allow you in here alone you will have compromised her and will need to marry her."

"I only need to convince her that it is the best course of action."

Bruce frowned. Not quite how he'd hoped to enter the parson's mousetrap.

"She loves you, of that I'm certain."

"I pray you are correct. Pray for a Christmas miracle."

"I will do so." Michael slowly unlocked the door and stepped back. With a nod he walked away.

Bruce took a deep breath and slowly opened the door to a darkened room. The fire was low. He closed the door behind him and strode across the carpet to stir the embers back to life. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he spied Silvia curled under the covers, her hair escaping its pins. He quietly moved to the bed, setting her bag on a chair. He sat on the counterpane and began to pull the pins out gently. He watched with fascination as her hair loosened. He set aside the pins, hoping he'd found all of them, and then let his fingers stroke a strand of silk. She slept soundly, dark shadows under her eyelids, tear stains on her cheeks.

"Oh, my poor love." He caressed her cheek.

Her lashes fluttered and finally, she turned to focus on him. "Bruce?"

"Good afternoon, sweetheart. I missed you."

"Am I sick that the doctor makes a house call?"

"Perhaps. I'm told melancholia struck you down."

"I concur with your diagnosis. But you're the doctor and I am not."

"Don't belittle your skills. You are the helpmate I believe God designed for me."

"The baby."

"He has a home and a family to care for him and was not my child."

She sighed. "How could she be so convincing? How could Sir McElroy hate me so much?"

"I believe it's me he wanted to destroy."

"I can understand why."

"Really? Do tell." He allowed his hand to play with more of her hair as she talked.

"You are everything he isn't."

"In what way?"

"You are a gentleman. You treat everyone with dignity, even an orphaned babe. You give unselfishly of yourself to help others. And you encourage me to use my gifts."

"So, you admit you are gifted."

"I've been questioning the validity of that self-assessment."

"You are gifted," he said. "And we need to trust that baby will grow in wisdom and grace in his new home. The family is adopting him, making him legally theirs so he won't bear the shame of being baseborn."

"I don't deserve someone like you."

"I hope always to be worthy of you, my dear."

"I don't know."

"You don't believe her lies, do you?"

"No. Michael explained how impossible it would have been. But it's hard to erase hours of her screaming about you while in labor."

"She must have been compensated well for that performance. It almost worked."

"Yes. Almost."

"Do you think you could bear to stand by my side and speak vows with me on Sunday?"

"I'm afraid."

"Of what?"

"That you will find life with me full of disappointment."

"I'm certain I will."

"What?" She pushed herself up.

"I'm sure we will both disappoint each other. It happens. It does not mean we might not also find joy, peace, and contentment in between those moments, as well."

"A time for everything under heaven."

"Ecclesiastes. Yes. You are a practical realist. You didn't think we'd never endure hardship or struggle, did you?"

"No. But I suppose somewhere deep inside, I'd hoped for it."

"Hope is a powerful thing. Do you want to know what I hope for?"

"What?"

"To spend the rest of my life with you by my side through it all, to love, cherish, and experience whatever God has in store for us."

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"I will still marry you." She sat up and placed a hand along his cheek. "It is highly improper for you to be in my room unchaperoned."

“Michael warned me that I would need to marry you now, because I’ve well and truly compromised you.”

She grinned. “Then I suggest you at least kiss me. I need something to sustain me until our wedding day.”

Bruce acquiesced to her request with great pleasure.

As he pulled back, he shook his head. “You tempt me to stay for far more. Do you think you could rise and meet me downstairs? I long to spend time with my future bride without thoroughly compromising her. There are some activities I’d prefer to save for our wedding night.”

Silvia grinned and nodded. “I’ll meet you downstairs in a few minutes.”

“I’ll be waiting.” He rose and with one final kiss he left the room.

Christmas morning found the church packed. The minister stood at the front and called the banns one last time. As no objections were given, he called for the wedding to commence.

Michael escorted Silvia down the aisle to her beloved who gave her a smile of encouragement. The service was long, and she itched for it to be over so they could be alone, yet knew that it would be hours before Bruce would be able to spirit her away to his home. Lord and Lady Remington were hosting their reception at Rose Hill and the entire village was invited to join in the celebration.

Bruce and Silvia were pronounced man and wife and were soon exiting to find the snow softly falling from the sky. Coins were tossed as they ran to the carriage. Inside, Bruce leaned over and kissed her thoroughly.

“That my dear, was the appetizer.”

“I’m hungry for far more.”

“Patience. We waited years for this day and a few more hours to honor our guests will make tonight all the sweeter.

“I’m glad Sir Tidley has given us use of his townhouse in London. I long to show you some of the sights.”

“I anticipate the ones I’ll see tonight. I need to check how well you’ve healed from your surgery.”

Bruce blushed.

She placed her hand alongside his face. “I love you, Dr. Miller.”

He kissed her. “I love you Mrs. Miller.”

For everything there was a time and season. This moment in time was her season for love. She snuggled up to her husband for the ride to Rose Hill, anticipating a life of adventure with this man by her side. The doctor’s daughter had happily become the doctor’s wife. A Christmas dream come true.

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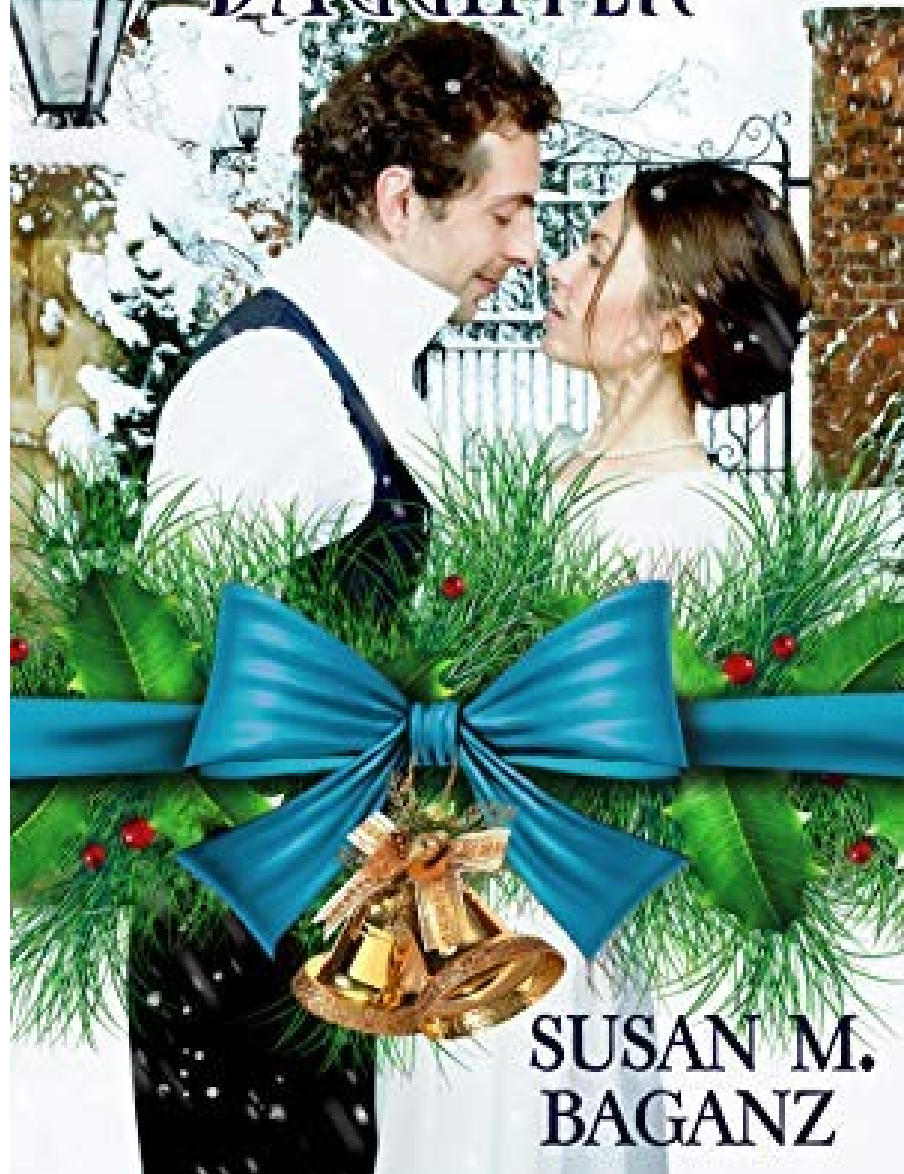


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